

Other Worlds Than These

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Summary: A young dark haired woman with electric blue eyes wakes up in the middle of the desert. She should be dead, but is not. She should not have a body, but does. She is at the way station, the stop between this world and the next, and she is not alone. An ageless stranger is watching, and he has plans of his own.

1. Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Resumption

The first sensation she felt was the soft cold ground beneath her, the type of cold that dirt only gets after not seeing the rays of the sun for an untold number of years, or decades as was the case with the ground that was now lying beneath her. Next came the smell. It was the faint scent of hay, although how she knew what hay smelled like was beyond her. Slowly opening her eyes, after realizing that she actually had eyes, the woman got her first glimpse of the building she had landed in, or teleported, or was hallucinating. It being a hallucination was the most likely scenario, all things considered, yet she still took the time to look at her surroundings.

She was in what looked like a stable, although the black decaying hay and bone dry wood that made up what was left of the walls and ceiling told of years of neglect. Towards her immediate front was an open doorway from which bright sunlight flooded the first few meters near the entrance of the dilapidated building. Her eyes not use to real sunlight struggled to cut through the rigid stonewall of brightness. The woman looked down at her body for the first time. She was wearing faded blue jeans, a cotton army green shirt, and simple tan boots on her feet that looked as if they had seen several years of use.

_Certainly not clothes that I would have picked for myself, not that I ever needed clothes _she thought. Bracing herself on her hands the

woman attempted to stand. The trembling legs managed to lift her body halfway before they collapsed beneath her, the woman letting out a sharp cry of pain as a result. _Definitely not a rampant hallucination, at least with those I could not feel real pain, and I could actually walk. _

This time reaching for the handholds on the wall the woman managed to lift herself up. Letting out a small grunt of triumph she began to work her way towards the entrance, making sure to keep both hands firmly on the wall and going no faster than a shuffles pace. When she reached the exit the woman took a deep breath, suddenly realizing how dry the air actually was, and took her first step out into the sunlight. She almost immediately regretted this decision as her unnaturally pale skin which had never felt the penetrating rays of the sun immediately began to glow red with painful sunburn. The sheer oppressiveness of the desert sun made it feel as if sharp daggers were entering into her newly acquired skin and before her mind was able to register what was happening, her body had already flung her back inside to the cool embrace of the darkness.

A thin, warm trickle of blood drifted down her forehead. Wiping it off she looked forward to see what she had hit her head on. In front of her stood a door, free standing, its hinges attached to empty air. The door was ashen grey with familiar symbols scrawled across its impassive face, and upon reaching her hand out to touch it seemed to alternate between radiating a soft warmth to bitter cold.

"Well now this certainly is a surprise," a male voice said from somewhere behind her. The woman quickly moved into a sitting position and instinctively crawled back a few feet. Before her was a man clad in a dark robe, the hood of which covered the top half of his face in solid darkness. There was a smile on his lips _But not in his eyes_ she thought, although she could not actually see his eyes.

"I suppose I have to congratulate you, although I'm sure that you being here is not of your own doing. Still it's not often I'm caught off guard," the man in the dark robe said, his smile growing even wider "Cortana." He finished.

Cortana attempted to say something, anything, but found that she couldn't, little more than a soft moan coming from her unpracticed vocal cords. "Oh but where are my manners?" The man said before waving his left hand in an almost dismissive gesture, the hand itself looking like wax, as if someone had tried to create a human body but failed on some fundamental level. "There now you may speak, you can even stand too if you want." The man in the dark robe said, his smile turning back to a mere grin.

Cortana thought for a moment about standing as he suggested, but decided against it. For some reason she felt safer sitting on the ground (staying close to the door) with her back up against the stable wall. Instead she spoke, and this time words managed to come out "How do you know my name?"

"The same way I know everything else." He said simply.

_That damn grin _she thought. The man in black took a few steps forward and Cortana had to resist the urge to flinch. He stretched his arm out towards the ash colored door, his hand not quite making contact.

"This shouldn't still be here." He muttered under his breath.

"Who are you? Where is this place?" She asked.

The grin on the man's face finally disappeared, replaced by a look that almost resembled disappointment. "The father asked me those same questions. Given your reputation I had hoped that you would come up with something more, original to ask me." Cortana said nothing and after a few moments the man in the dark robe sighed, "Very well. As to who I am, I could give you a name but it would be a lie. Truth is I've quite forgotten what my real name is, but for the sake of convenience you may call me Walter. As for your second question, you are in the desert."

"I figured that much out for myself Walt." Cortana spat, feeling her old defiance creep back into her. The man in black chuckled at this.

"Now there is the quick wit I've heard so much about. Fine, you are at the way station, the stop between your world and the next, and before you ask me your next question," the man said stopping Cortana as she was about to open her mouth "yes you did die, or at the very least the closest thing a little computer such as yourself can come to dying. Ah but even HAL 9000 in that old Kubrick film feared death did he not?"

She bristled at his answer and glared up at him, folding her still reddened arms across her chest. "I'm not a little computer." She said.

"No, not anymore," he whispered. "You can call this your afterlife, although that is not what this place really is. Oh but look at you, even with all your intelligence you have already gone far passed your ability to comprehend. I'm afraid you're going to have to figure the rest out for yourself." He leaned slightly forward, "And do you know what the good news is?"

"What?"

"I've decided not to kill you. The doorway is still here which means ka still has a purpose for you. I am interested to see what it is, and" he turned his head to face the entrance of the stable and Cortana followed his gaze. It took her a moment to see what he was looking at but finally she saw it. Just outside the entrance the light seemed to bend ever so slightly, slipping around the nearly invisible figure before finally finding purchase again and continuing its descent towards the floor "you and your friend may yet prove useful to me." The large toothy smile the he had first greeted her with returned fully.

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The Spartan opened his eyes and immediately took in a face full of sun. He covered his face with his hand for a few moments until his polarized visor was able to block most of the glare. He got to his feet and checked his equipment, his armor being first. To his surprise it was still fully intact. He rechecked the systems in his suit to make sure, and frowned slightly when they all came back green again. _There should at least be some damage_ he thought. There were

only two options as to why this was the case, and the Master Chief didn't like either of them. The first was that this was some type of dream, the mind's last desperate gasp before death. He had been dead before, at least technically speaking, and had experienced those hallucinations first hand before being resuscitated by either a fellow Spartan or a combat medic. _But this feels too real to be one of those._ That left the second option that he was teleported here by some Forerunner system or construct just prior to the impact of the plasma mortar, and based on his personal experience that never meant anything good.

The Master Chief checked his weapons as he attempted to raise fire team Majestic, then Spartan Sara Palmer, and then Captain Lasky, but received no reply. He had two fragmentation grenades, 230 rounds for his assault rifle, 82 for his pistol, a full load of 120 rounds for the light rifle he had relieved from a dead Promethean, and a fully charged Energy Sword. Scanning the horizon the Spartan saw a small group of worn down buildings in the direction that his HUD identified as west, with the large sun that had blinded him only minutes before just beginning to make its descent towards what appeared to be mountains in the far off distance. The sun didn't look right to the Master Chief. It wasn't Requiem's sun, it was tooâ€¦

I could give you 40,000 different reasons why that sunset isn't realâ€¦but I'll never know if it feels real.

He shook his head slightly, chasing the thought away. Thinking about the past, thinking about her would just get him killed, and he needed to find a way to get back to his unit. Walking towards the small cluster of buildings the Master Chief picked up what appeared to be two people talking with his augmented hearing. He was still too far away to make out what they were saying, but one voice was that of a young woman perhaps in her mid twenties, the other was a man but he couldn't estimate what age that individual might be. Not wanting to take chances the Spartan activated his camouflage unit which rendered him nearly invisible and sprinted towards the nearest building, his heavy boots hardly making any noise on the hard pan desert floor.

Reaching the side of the ramshackle stable that the voices seemed to be coming from the Spartan put the side of his helmet up against the dry cracked wood and listened, "Oh but look at you, even with all your intelligence you have already gone far pass your ability to comprehend. I'm afraid you're going to have to figure the rest out for yourself, and do you know what the good news is?" That was the male's voice, a second later he heard the woman's voice respond.

"What?" The voice sounded familiar. _It sounds likeâ€¦_he cut that thought off before it even started and moved towards the entrance of the stable, exchanging his assault rifle for his pistol.

"I've decided not to kill you." The Master Chief quickened his pace at this statement and soon reached the entrance, scanning the interior with his pistol drawn. In the middle of the room was a man dressed in a black robe, his face hidden. A few feet from him sat a young woman with black shoulder length hair. In between them stood the door. The Spartan didn't dare look at her again, knowing who she reminded him of, and instead focused his targeting reticule on the man, center mass. He hadn't established himself as a threat yet, but

the Master Chief wanted to be ready all the same. The man in black turned his head and despite the Spartan's active camouflage seemed to look at him directly in the eye. "You and your friend may yet prove useful to me, isn't that right John?" The dark man smiled at him.

"Chief" Cortana said. Before John could even register his movements, a feat he had not thought possible by any non augmented human, the dark man had crossed the distance between himself and Cortana, bringing the open palm of his right down on the back of her head knocking her out cold and resulting in a sickening slap. The Master Chief adjusted his aim and fired off a single round, but missed, the bullet impacting one of the support beams and causing the dry wood to disintegrate into dust. The roof of the stable sagged slightly but managed to keep from collapsing.

"Only misfires against me John." The dark man said chuckling to himself. John adjusted the grip on his pistol and brought the sights up to the man's head.

"On your knees, or I won't miss this time." The Chief said.

"But you will, and it seems you have a choice to make. You can either chase after me through the desert or go through the doorway with her." He gestured down to the limp form of Cortana as he began to move back into the shadows. "I'm sure you could survive long enough to make it to the mountains, but I doubt she will. There are many paths to the Tower but you may choose only one." After he finished talking the man in black melted into the darkness. There was a sharp birdlike cry and a crow flew out of the space where he had stood only moments before, swiftly passing just a few inches by John's helmeted head. With practiced precision the Spartan twirled around and fired his pistol at the bird, but missed yet again.

The Chief turned back into the stable and knelt by Cortana's unconscious and inexplicably human form. After scanning the room for additional threats John looked at the face of his friend, the person whom he had supposedly lost over seven months ago. After several moments the Spartan seemed to make a decision. He picked her up and made two short strides towards the door. Grabbing onto the brass door knob, the Master Chief almost thought he heard the sound of bells ringing. After taking a deep breath, and deciding that maybe this was a dying hallucination after all, he turned the handle and opened the door. Instead of seeing the far wall of the stable, John saw a dense green forest, not unlike the ones he grew up with on Reach. The bells seemed to grow louder as the Spartan walked through, the door closing by itself behind him before slowly fading away.

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2: A Rose, a Stone, and an Unfound Door

_The hillside was littered with bodies, decaying corpses festering in the mid-world sun. Vultures circled overhead, waiting impatiently for the battle to be concluded so that they could have their fill of human flesh, a true rarity. The statues of various animals dotted the slope of the hill, their worn and weathered faces now covered in the blood of men. _The Guardians of the Beams_ she thought, although she did not know why she did. Looking to her right the woman saw a vast

army, perhaps two thousand strong. The army was almost medieval looking in nature, the soldiers carrying pikes, swords, crossbows, staves, and no two uniforms were alike. To her right she heard the sound of a horn blowing, she looked and saw twelve beleaguered figures. One had an arrow through his eye and was holding the horn up to his lips, his other hand holding what appeared to be a revolver. The sound of bells filled her ears and the image of the battle began to fade. _No, not yet _she thought, but it was too late. The vision faded into blackness, and gunfire filled the air._

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When Cortana awoke her back was propped up against a tree, and there was a gun to her face. Looking up she saw the hand that it was connected to, and the person that was connected to it, John. "Identify yourself." He said his voice a steady monotone.

"Chief, it's me." She replied, still attempting to focus her vision.

"Your name." he repeated, his hand still steady.

She glared at him with her electric blue eyes, and for just a moment she thought she saw his hand falter before becoming steady again. "CTN 0452-9, Cortana, Third Generation Smart AI, United Nations Space Command. Does that make you happy?" When he didn't lower his weapon she sighed and closed her eyes, attempting to think. Then she began to feel like her old immaterial self again, information, equations, and bits of data flowing past her. Finally she settled on the scrap of data she was looking for and opened her eyes. "Olly Olly Oxen Free." She said. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before at last lowering his pistol and placing it on his hip. He bent down on one knee and pulled out a thing of bio foam.

"You're bleeding." He said, and Cortana winced as he began to apply it to the cut on her forehead. "Lean forward." He asked, and he began to inspect the back of her head where the dark man had hit her.

"First you point a gun at me, now you're worried about my health. You really do know how to send a girl mixed messages." She said, giving him a small smile.

The Master Chief paused his inspection and said "I guess it really is you." She could hear the smile in his voice but frowned slightly when he said, "Or this could still be just a dream."

"Trust me John only reality could be this much of a pain," she said, holding up her sunburned forearms. She moved her eyes up to look at the roof of the forest and was glad for the shade that it provided, even if she was a little confused about how they ended up here. "So are you going to tell me how the desert suddenly turned into a bunch of woods?" she asked.

"We went through the door," he said evenly, and Cortana nodded as if she understood, although she really didn't. "How are you here?" he said quietly, and she looked back at him, and then turned away when she found that she couldn't meet his gaze.

"I don't know. All I remember is pain, then nothing, then the desert,

and then him." She replied, her shoulders shuddering softly at the thought of the dark man.

"And somewhere between dying and the desert you managed to get a hold of a body?"

"Apparently so, although don't ask me how that happened."

The Spartan nodded at this as if he understood and then stood up, and then offered Cortana his hand to pull her up. She took his hand and for the first time truly felt how strong his grip was. He towered over her small 5'10" frame at an even seven feet. "We need to get moving, find a way to make contact with UNSC forces."

"How are we going to do that John? This world, whatever it is, seems completely devoid of technology. I doubt we are even in the same galaxy anymore." Cortana said.

The Master Chief didn't want to acknowledge just how right Cortana could be. His instruments inside his HUD had been acting strange ever since they walked through the door. His compass was spinning wildly and he eventually had to dismiss the application because it became so distracting. His mission clock would also alternate between going twice the speed of normal time to slowing down to a near crawl. He dismissed that application as well. Nevertheless he pointed to the general direction in front of them and said, "We go this way."

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They had walked approximately five kilometers, at least according to the Chief's pace count which was never wrong, before Cortana finally called a time out. Having just acquired the ability to actually walk without falling flat on her face, she was still not used to traveling long distances on foot, and her legs were beginning to shake violently. Added to the muscle failure in her legs, she could feel angry blisters beginning to form on the soles of her feet. Apparently whoever had decided to dress her had neglected to provide socks, or any underwear for that matter. The worn out boots were killing her. "I need to take a break," she said, pressing her back up against a tree and willing her legs to stop shaking. It didn't work.

The Master Chief looked at her, and by his subtle stance Cortana could tell he was concerned. He placed the assault rifle on his back, the magnets holding it rigidly in place next to the Forerunner light rifle. He turned his head in the direction that they had been walking and said, "We need to keep moving." His stance shifted again as he turned back towards her and Cortana realized what he was thinking.

"John, don't," but before she could finish her protest he had closed the distance between them and picked her up in his arms and continued walking. She huffed angrily at him, "You know this was a lot easier when I was just a chip inside your helmet." John just shrugged his shoulders.

They passed the next few kilometers in silence before she decided to voice the question that had been on her mind since she first saw him again back at the way station. "John, how did you end up here?" When he did not reply she asked again "John, please." He looked at her for

a moment. Cortana's face was painted with worry, and even with his helmet her blue eyes found his.

The Spartan relented under the gaze, "I think I died," he said, looking away. Cortana closed her eyes and placed her head on the Spartan's armored chest. Pain, then nothing, and then the desert.

"How?" she asked.

He was silent for a few heartbeats. Cortana counted ten, attempting to sync her own with his before he answered. "I'll tell you later, right now you need to rest." She was about to protest when he added "I promise." Cortana nodded her head and then pressed it harder into his chest, drifting off into sleep.

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_ Her feet were bare and the ground in front of her was covered in a sea of red. At first she thought it was blood and that she was back at the battle. Looking down at her feet she realized that it wasn't blood, it was a field of roses. As the woman bent down to pick one of the flowers up she heard singing. It grew louder, but never overcame her senses. A wordless tune, but filled with so much happiness, and grief, and laughter; every human emotion, everything that ever was or would be was in that song. Tears clouded her vision as her outstretched hand gently surrounded one of the roses. The dark haired woman couldn't bring herself to pluck something so perfect from out of the ground and instead stood back up. The sound of a horn filled the air. _The same horn from the battle_, she thought, but it lacked the tone of defiance and anger that it had before. She searched frantically for the source of the blast and found it. In the distance a man was walking, horn in hand, revolvers strapped to his hips, ammunition belts crossing his chest. Before him was the Tower. _

_ It stood as a monolith, black against the blue sky, twisting and turning upwards in ways that no structure ever should, manmade or otherwise. The Dark Tower seemed both finite and infinite, and she could not give any approximation to its height. She doubted that anybody could. _A rose, a stone, and an unfound door, _a voice whispered from within and without her. _The Beams are weakening, the Tower will fall, and all of existence will go with it. Yet there is still much you must do. _She looked around for the source of the voice, wanted to ask what it meant, but already the bells were ringing, and she felt herself drift back into her body. _

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The darkness that followed the dream gave in to the relative brightness of the night. Cortana blinked her eyes twice and sat up. John was awake and sitting a few feet from her, staring off into the distance. "How long have we been stopped?" she asked him, rubbing her face with her hand and then brushing the few strands of hair behind her ears. _First thing I'm going to do when and if we find civilization is take my first shower_ she thought to herself, frowning.

"About an hour, but more time has passed than that." He said. To anyone else he would have sounded as toneless and emotionless as ever, but she could sense the underlying worry in his voice.

"What do you mean more time has passed?" she asked him.

He sighed audibly and said "I'm not sure myself, my internal clock," he pointed his left hand to his temple, his right hand still held the assault rifle firmly, his index finger hovering slightly over the trigger, "says its only been one hour, but it also feels like more time has passed then that." He lowered his hand and gripped the rifle, holding it at a semi port arms.

Cortana gave him a worried look and put her head in her hands. Looking up she got her first gaze of the night sky of the world that she and John had somehow landed up in. Something is not right she thought and closed her eyes. The data swam over her for several minutes. Opening her eyes again she looked back at John. "Those stars, none of the clusters match anything in the UNSC data banks."

"I figured as much," The Master Chief said. He paused for a moment and then added "You can still access it all?"

"Yes but at a much slower, and might I add frustrating, pace then when I was just an AI. I have to focus in order to do it, but so far it seems as if everything is still there." Cortana replied. A gust of cool night air swept itself against her, and Cortana became suddenly self-conscious about her own body, and folded her arms across her chest. If the Master Chief noticed he didn't show it, his eyes still fixed on some point in the distance. "Think we could build a fire Chief? It's a little cold for those of us not encased in half a ton of armor."

"No." he said.

"Why?"

"Because we are not alone," He pointed in the direction just over her right shoulder and said, "There is a group of people, human, approximately five or six in size. But they are not the group that I'm worried about."

"How come you're not worried?" she asked.

"They have lit a fire, and are either not concerned about noise discipline, or don't know how to exercise it. Definitely not military in nature, so I don't consider them a threat. The other group however," he pointed about twenty degrees further to the right, in line with the direction he was staring, "is about four people strong, probably armed, and they know we're here."

Cortana looked over her right shoulder and tried to see the fire that the Chief had pointed out, but couldn't. She then looked where he was pointing at now and asked "How do you know that they know we're here?"

"Because they haven't lit a fire either."

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3: The Gunslinger

The Master Chief had initially insisted that he take first watch, but Cortana had refused to hear it. She had pointed out that she had been sleeping for most of the day, that if he let her sleep he would simply stay up all night, and that although the Spartan was not willing to admit it he was tired. Cortana asked him how long it had been since he last slept, and rather than give her an answer he gave her his pistol. She knew how to fire it, at least on a textbook level; steady with both hands, aim down the front sights, use the tip of your index finger and press gently down on the trigger so that when it fires it's almost a mild surprise so as to avoid jerking the pistol, check your sight picture and scan for new targets. Still John gave her a brief tutorial on how to operate the weapon, and warned that its kick was difficult for normal humans to get use to.

"But I'm not a normal human," she said giving him a smile as she checked the magazine like he taught her and then put it back in, pulling the action back to put a round in the chamber.

He shook his head and said, "No, you're not." He leaned back against a nearby stump and folded his arms across his chest, his posture still perfect even in a supposedly relaxed position. "Wake me up in five hours, no more than that. I'll take watch for the rest of the night." She decided to give him six.

The thickness of the forest created a wall of darkness around them, sharply contrasted by the brightness of the stars in the sky. She used the moon to judge how much time had elapsed, having found after a few minutes of concentrating, swimming upriver through the UNSC archives that were still in her memory, that it was almost exactly similar in size and orbit as the Earth's moon. According to its position in the sky and her approximation of what season it was (she guessed midsummer although it felt and looked like early November) that the six hours had nearly passed, yet it felt closer to twenty. The moon, the face of which resembled that of a peddler, moved slower than a glacier across the sky, and there were times when Cortana could have sworn that she had saw it moving backwards slightly. Then once it reached the position in the sky that marked three hours, the moon seemed to move at an unnatural speed. It raced from the three hour mark to the six hour mark in a span of time that, and Cortana was willing to bet good money on this, was no more than twenty minutes long. Perhaps her mind was playing tricks on her, the affects of rampancy still showing themselves even in her now physical form. Or maybe John was right; time was just not working right in this world.

She crawled over to John and tapped him on the shoulder. He woke up immediately and said, "You let me sleep for longer than five hours."

Cortana looked at him sheepishly "How did you figure that out?"

"Because I know you," he reached for his pistol and she handed it to him. "Get some sleep; we are leaving here at dawn."

"That's if I actually can get any sleep. I feel like that's all I've been doing since I came here." But sleep she did, and again she dreamed.

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_The town was named Tull, at least according to the aged and cracked sign that had the town's name scrawled across it in a way that made it look as if naming the town was simply an afterthought. He stood in the middle of the street, the same man she had seen twice before in her other dreams. There were twin revolvers in his hand, and before him were the people of Tull. Their dead and dying bodies leaked blood, turning Tull's dirt streets into crimson red mud. The few townspeople that had managed to avoid the lead and death that the twin revolvers meted out attempted to escape. _

_They dropped their makeshift weapons as they ran, but the gunslinger's hands turned into a blur of motion and several large thunderclaps sounded off. The revolvers were loud, louder than any gun or rifle that the woman had ever heard before. As if struck by the god head himself the remaining survivors of the town fell in front of the sights. _I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father. I kill with my heart; _his voice spoke, though his lips did not move. His hands were like lightning as he reloaded his guns. He scanned the town once more before returning the guns to the holsters on his hips. He moved across the street, stepping over the bodies as he went and retrieved a beast of burden from the stable. The man rode into the Mohaine Desert, on to the way station, and towards the man he hunted. The people of Tull, from the oldest man to the youngest child, remained in the street to rot and be pecked by scavengers. The town was dead, and he had killed it. _

_The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed. _

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A nudge to her arm woke Cortana up. John was standing over her, his armor covered in morning dew, the water shining like crystals in the early light. She looked down and discovered that she was covered in condensation as well. She shivered slightly. _What I wouldn't give for a blanket or a coat, _she thought.

"I'm going to scout out the second group, the ones that are armed and know we're here. I want to see what we are dealing with," he said and began to walk off.

"Good morning to you too then." She stood up and stretched out the soreness in her legs. "Hold up I'm coming with you," she said. John turned around and looked at her, his head tilted slightly. "Just like old times," she smiled at him.

Cortana expected him to say no but instead he nodded his head. "Stay behind me at all times. If I tell you to stay somewhere you stay, if I tell you to run you run. Understand?" He said it as if it was an order, but she knew him better than that.

"So you do care."

"You know I do Cortana," he said and she blushed slightly.

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They had walked approximately half a click when the Master Chief threw up a closed fist signaling her to stop. He turned around to face her and pointed to a cluster of nearby bushes. "Stay there under cover," he said in a low voice barely above a whisper, "We are approximately 200 meters away from their position. If I'm not back within thirty minutes I want you to leave as quickly and as quietly as possible. Do you understand?"

Cortana shook her head in the negative, "John how am I supposed to even know how long thirty minutes is? Even if I use the sun to mark time we both know by now that it won't be a real half hour. Time is just too, slippery in this world."

The Spartan gave her a look through his visor and she imagined him raising an eyebrow. "When I tell you to I want you to start counting," he said. She thought about asking him why but decided against it. "Now," he said. Cortana began to count steadily in her head. She reached fifty two before he stopped her. "That's one minute, one real minute," he said.

"How could you possibly know that?"

"During our training on Reach, Chief Mendez would send us out in the woods at night without any way to conventionally tell time. We were ordered to meet at a specific rendezvous point at a specific time. If we were even one second off he would send us back to barracks without food. Eventually it just clicked." He then handed Cortana his assault rifle and two extra magazines.

"Feeling a little overconfident are we?" she asked with a small chuckle.

"If I do this recon right I won't need it, and if I don't come back you'll need the extra fire power. Besides if I run into any real trouble I still have the light rifle," he replied.

Cortana did her best to stifle a laugh, "No I meant with me actually being able to fire this thing, it's nearly half as big as I am, and it's not as if I've been working out regularly." John felt a smile twitch at the corners of his mouth but said nothing. Instead he engaged his active camouflage and faded into the forest.

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The gunslinger was lying on his side, ear to the ground. His right hand, which was missing two fingers, covered his other ear as he listened. He felt his revolver press up against his hip on his left side. It had been passed down through the countless generations of his family, from one gunslinger to the next; forged from Excalibur, the sword of Arthur Eld who had united the peoples of mid world in the days before the world had moved on.

"Are you sure there are two of them?" The man next to him asked, the other revolver strapped to his right hip.

"Yes, I had thought there was only one, but it seems he has a companion. A woman, young, and not nearly as quiet as him." Roland Deschain son of Steven, of the Line of Eld, of Gilead that was replied to Eddy Dean of New York. He looked at the other two members of his ka-tet, there was a boy not quite in his teens with a ruger

pistol at his side. In his lap sat an animal that looked only vaguely similar to a dog that had been crossed with a badger and a raccoon. The other was a young black woman. She was sitting in a wheelchair, with both her legs ending at the knees.

"What about the larger group that is following behind us?" Jake asked his voice in the same low whisper as Roland and Eddy's.

"They're not dangerous, just curious. They'll come to us when they are ready," the gunslinger replied, frowning slightly. He had wanted to test the other members of the group ability to sense when they were being followed. A small and non threatening group of curious onlookers seemed like a perfect opportunity to do just that. That changed yesterday, however, when Jake began to act strangely. The boy suddenly became far less talkative and began to scan the woods in front of him as if looking for threats, and occasionally glancing around behind him. Jake was still too young and inexperienced to be able to tell just what the hairs standing up on the back of his neck were, but the gunslinger knew and soon he began to feel the sensation as well.

When they had stopped for the night he told the ka-tet of the new arrival and placed his ear to the ground, closing his eyes. After a few moments he felt the hard vibrations. Heavy he thought, and for me to not be able to hear him. Now he was feeling the hard vibrations again, but this time they were coming towards them. Whoever was making the footsteps kept his voice low enough so that he could not hear it, but he could hear the voice of the woman. Too far away to make out what she was saying, but at one point he thought he heard a laugh.

"So what are we going to do about them?" Susannah, the woman in the wheelchair asked. Roland looked at her and saw a dangerous glint in her eye. He knew what it meant, and who was really giving it.

"We act as if we are doing nothing. Go through our normal routine, move only when I do." The gunslinger said and pushed himself up from the ground.

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The Spartan moved quickly through the underbrush without making a sound despite his massive size and weight. He slowed as he reached the clearing where the voices were coming from, taking short deliberate steps, heel to toe. He checked the status of his active camouflage to make sure it was still working before he passed through the last bit of dense foliage, gracefully avoiding making contact with any of the leaves or branches. When he got his first look at the armed group he was surprised, and felt a little disappointed. They were not at all what he had expected. There were four of them; a boy who was a few years younger than he was when he had received his augmentations, a man with long shoulder length hair, a crippled dark skinned woman sitting in a wheel-chair, and another man approximately six feet in height.

He looked familiar to the Master Chief, but he couldn't place where he had seen him before. He was currently slipping a long leather strap across his shoulder which was attached to a horn. The horn itself had a small crack running through the center of it, and it was stained dark red at the part where the lips would go. The three males

were armed, although only with pistols. They appeared to be going through a normal morning routine, but the Spartan saw the ruse for what it was. It was too rehearsed, too theatrical. Each movement they made was deliberately for show and only the man with the horn seemed to be acting naturally.

John was about to slip back into the underbrush when he saw all four of them exchange looks at the same time, their eyes hard and determined. The gunslinger turned slowly and looked the Master Chief directly in the eye. The Spartan and the gunslinger both drew their weapons; the Chief's movements were so fast that his active camouflage was forced to disengage. Eddy and Jake drew their weapons a heartbeat later. They were fast, faster than any normal human would be, but not nearly as fast as the two dealers of death that stood before them. To the three other members of the ka-tet it seemed as though Roland and this seven foot tall armored behemoth that now stood before them were even in speed.

The Master Chief knew better though. He had lost the draw by several milliseconds, and the gunslinger knew it as well.

4. Chapter 4

Chapter 4: First Comes Smiles, Then Lies. Last is Gunfire.

She had counted to 52 ten times when the sensations began. It started in her lower stomach as a hard ball of ice forming and expanding, it moved up her back where her muscles began to twitch as if small currents of electricity were running through them, and finally it reached the base of her neck. Then her body shook with violent spasms, glowing equations flowed beneath her skin. The shaking stopped and Cortana opened her eyes. They flashed red before returning to their normal electric blue.

_John, _she thought.

Cortana darted out from the safety of the bushes and ran, assault rifle in hand, ignoring the painful pops of the blisters that had formed on the soles of her feet the day before. He would be angry at her for not doing what he had said, staying where it was safe, but she didn't care. John was in trouble, and he needed her.

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Weapons drawn, the gunslingers and the Spartan stood ten meters apart, and neither side moved.

"Fuck me it's a damn robot," Eddie Dean said. Roland said nothing, his eyes fixed on the Spartan's visor. The green being before him was certainly more machine than man, but he was still a man as Roland could sense the eyes staring at him from behind whatever material made up that golden colored visor which kept them from seeing his face. The gunslinger knew what this thing was, and he doubted that his ka-tet realized what kind of danger they were in.

His fellow travelers had become skilled gunslingers in their own right in the time since he took them on as apprentices and became their dihn, the boy Jake perhaps having the potential to surpass

Roland himself one day, but they were not yet skilled enough in the art of dealing lead to handle this new threat. He was a seppe-sai, a death-seller. Roland had thought himself the last one in all of mid-world after the disastrous Battle of Jericho Hill, but here after countless years of wandering stood another. _No not a gunslinger, but a seppe-sai all the same, hands built for death_, Roland thought. The grip on his long-gun tightened and he spoke. "Hile stranger."

"Same to you," John said and he adjusted the light rifle to aim at the gunslingers heart. "Drop your weapons, all of you."

"Hun," it was Susannah who spoke this time. "In case you haven't noticed we have three guns to your one. Maybe you're the one that should drop yours." Her arms were crossed and she managed to look dangerous despite her physical condition.

John nodded his head once, "Perhaps you're right." His left hand then went to his hip and he grabbed a fragmentation grenade. The Spartan's arm flew back up and he pulled the pin out with his thumb. Jake and Eddie instinctively moved a few inches back. They had only ever seen Roland move as fast as this, big black and green thing. The gunslinger remained where he was. "Now we're even," John said evenly.

"So we are," said Roland.

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Cortana crashed into the clearing, caring little for the noise she was making, twigs and leaves crackling beneath her feet. She barely noticed the two males, who now had their guns pointed at her, and instead her eyes went to John, and then to the man she had seen in her dreams. _His eyes, they are the same as John's_, she thought. Roland's light blue eyes never broke the Spartan's gaze, his aim remained steady, the blue steeled revolver reflecting the sun like a mirror and momentarily blinded her. She had seen what that gun could do. It wasn't normal, and she could almost feel the power that radiated from it. As irrational as it was Cortana believed that the Master Chief's shields would do little against the bullets that came out of it.

"A friend of yours?" asked the gunslinger.

"Yes" said John.

"It would be wise to tell her to leave."

"Agreed. Cortana go away, I have work to do."

"No," she shook her head and then popped the magazine out of the assault rifle and placed it on the ground. "Nobody has to die here."

"I think, I think she's ok," the boy holding the Ruger said. He hesitated looking unsure of himself, and then placed the pistol back on his hip.

"You sure about this Jake?" Eddie said. Jake had always been good at sensing things, Roland had gone so far as to say he was gifted with the touch. The boy simply nodded and Eddie put his gun down as well.

Cortana let out a small breath and then walked over to John. The gunslinger and the Spartan had not moved at all, seemingly oblivious to what had been going on around them. She bent down and picked up the pin, then slid the pin back into the grenade that John was still holding.

Closing her hands around his fist she looked up at him, "Chief, please. You don't have to do this, not anymore." At last he looked at her and she reached out a hand towards his right arm and it relented under her touch, the rifle dropping to his side. The gunslinger un-cocked his revolver a moment later and placed it back in his holster.

"I told you to stay there and wait for me," John said still looking at her.

"And what would have happened if I had?" He had no answer for her.

Eddie let out a loud cough and everybody in the clearing turned to look at him. Once he was sure he had everybody's attention he spoke "Yeah umm just a word of advice mysterious beautiful lady, next time you think about walking through the woods with your giant killer robot you might want to bring a leash. You know, so he doesn't go off and try and shoot everybody again."

"He is not a robot," Cortana glared at him and Eddie wilted under it. He felt Susannah glare at him too and knew he would be paying for the mysterious beautiful lady comment for several days. Sometimes he wished that God had not saw fit to curse him with a big mouth.

"Then what is he?" asked Jake.

"I am a Spartan. Master Chief Petty Officer Sierra 117 of the UNSC." John said, speaking up for Cortana.

Eddie rubbed his face with his hands, "Alright three questions. One, what is a Spartan? Two, what's the UNSC? And three, what kind of person has a number for a name?"

The Master Chief sighed. This was the reason why he disliked working with civilians, too much talking and too many question. Cortana answered the questions for him and not for the first time since he had found her in the desert he was thankful to have her back.

"We are part of the United Nations Space Command, a Spartan is a type of soldier, and just for your information there is nothing wrong with having a number for a name. Does that satisfy your curiosity?"

"United Nations Space Command?" Susannah asked, and glanced up at Eddie.

"There wasn't anything like that around during my time Suze," he said, answering her unspoken question.

"Maybe they come from a different time then us. Or maybe a different world altogether," Jake said. Cortana couldn't help but smile at him; he was kind of cute for a kid. Note to self, see if you still have the pictures from when John was a kid inside your memory. She

wouldn't be able to embarrass him with them like she had originally planned to way back before the First Battle of Earth, but they would still be nice to look at. "Where and when are you guys from?" he asked.

"Well where we come from it's the year 2557." Cortana paused for a moment, she had answered the when easily enough but the where would be a lot more difficult. She couldn't very well tell them that in reality she was only eight years old and until a few days ago was little more than a sentient computer program, and she definitely couldn't tell them the truth about John. She doubted he even remembered what planet he was born on. No, the best course of action was to tell a little bit of the truth, but keep the details as vague as possible. "As to where we are from, I was born on Planet Reach which is a colony, was a colony, of Earth. The caveman over here grew up there as well."

Eddie let out a low whistle, "Well folks we have some genuine spacemen here. 2557 you say? I won't lie I was hoping I'd keep the record on that one. My name is Eddie Dean of New York 1987, that's Jake Chambers of New York 1977, and that's my wife Susannah Dean of New York 1964." Cortana blinked. _Certainly wasn't expecting this, they act as if coming from different time periods isn't that big of a deal._ She began to think of the anthropological value of being able to interview people from over 600 years in the Earth's past but then shook it out of her head. It did little good to get distracted now. Eddie then pointed over to the gunslinger who had rolled a cigarette and lit it, bringing the smoke deep into his lungs and then slowly letting it out, "Oh and long, dark, and ugly over there isâ€|"

"I am Roland Deschain of Gilead that was," the gunslinger said, cutting Eddie off. "What happened to your world Reach?"

"Reach was destroyed," the Master Chief said and only Cortana noticed his fist clench slightly as he said it.

"How?" Roland asked

"It was glassed by the Covenant," the Spartan replied, his voice had a tone of finality to it.

Roland merely shook his head in confirmation, took a last drag on his cigarette and flicked it off into the underbrush, its glowing tip arcing like a sun passing through the heavens. "We are well met then, Sierra 117 and Cortana of Reach that was. Tell me, how did you come to mid-world; through death, doorway, or thinny?"

"Death," Cortana said her voice barely above a whisper. John's stance shifted slightly as if he was going to move towards her, but then he seemed to decide against it and returned to his original pose. Cortana cleared her throat and continued, "We ended up in the desert. There was a man there, I can't describe him to you other than he was wearing a dark robe. Somehow a doorway opened up and we ended up here." The gunslinger raised his eyebrows at the mention of the dark man.

"This man in the dark robe, what name did he go by?"

"He told me to call him Walter."

Roland nodded his head, "Yes I knew him as Walter; he is known in some worlds as Walter o'Dim, in others as Richard Fannin, in others as Marten Broadcloak, in others as The Walking Dude, and in still others as The Ageless Stranger."

Cortana looked at the gunslinger. _How many worlds has he been too, _she thought. She glanced at John and could tell that he was thinking the same.

"So you managed to meet up with old Jeepers Creepers and are still in one piece huh?" Eddie said chuckling. "I wouldn't get too hung up over the whole dying thing if I were you. Hell Jakey boy here has died twice and managed to find his way back to mid-world both times didn't you Jake?" He clapped a hand down on the boy's shoulders at this, who in turn became very interested at the ground between his feet.

"Didn't make it any more fun or less painful," he said.

"And it's not exactly something you mention around polite company either," said Susannah.

The Spartan cocked his head at this, "Does death not mean anything in mid-world?"

Eddie frowned, "No it does. In fact I'd say 99.99% of the time its permanent, but if ka still has something for you to do then somehow it will find a way to bring you back."

There's that word again, ka, Cortana thought wondering what it might mean. John seemed to be satisfied with the explanation though because he did not ask any more questions.

Roland stood up from the tree he was leaning on and walked past the Master Chief and Cortana, "We need to get moving, we've wasted too much daylight already." He faced the Master Chief and added, "We follow the path of the beam by way of the turtleâ€|"

"And to The Dark Tower," Cortana finished his sentence. Roland looked at her and his light blue eyes reminded her again of John's.

"Yes," was all he said and he began to walk away again, his ka-tet following behind without a word.

"What is The Dark Tower?" John asked.

"I don't know exactly John, but I think it might be a way home."

He nodded once, "Then that is where we are going too," and they too walked out of the clearing.

5. Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Jericho

The Master Chief and Cortana walked behind Roland's ka-tet, making sure to keep their distance. John had picked up the assault rifle that Cortana had dropped before they left the clearing, reloading the magazine and pulled the action back. He handed the assault rifle back

to Cortana. "Next time you decide to run into the middle of what is about to be a firefight, don't drop your weapon," he said.

"I think I managed to talk our way out of that one fairly well thank you," she said, taking the weapon from him.

"Yes, but that is not always going to be an option."

"How do you know? You've never tried."

"Diplomacy has never been my strong suit." Cortana sighed at this. John had many admirable qualities, but functioning well in times of peace was not one of them. Dr. Halsey had made sure of that. She gestured with her head towards the assault rifle she was now carrying.

"I still can't believe you trust me enough to shoot this thing."

The Master Chief shrugged, "I would rather have you armed than unarmed, and it is an automatic so your chances of actually hitting something are greatly increased." His voice only had a slight hint of amusement to it, but she knew that for a Spartan, especially her Spartan, he might as well have been laughing his head off.

"Laugh it up big guy," she scowled at him, although it didn't reach her eyes. She looked at the gunslingers ahead of them. Roland had broken off from the main group and seemed to be waiting for them to catch up. When they did he spoke to the Master Chief.

"I would like to have a word with her."

"If you have anything to talk about with her you can do it just as well in front of me," John replied.

"It would be better if I talked to her alone."

The Master Chief's fingers twitched towards his pistol, but Cortana intervened and stepped between them. "If these two are going to keep trying to kill each other, I can at least try to limit it to once per day," she thought. She turned towards John, "Chief, it's alright I can talk to him at least for a little while. You can go and walk with Eddie, Susannah, and Jake while I do," an unspoken level of understanding passed between them. If the gunslinger attempted anything with her, he would be risking the safety of the rest of his group.

"I will be watching," John said, and he left them.

Cortana had spent much of her life dealing with mass murderers. Of course with the exception of the Arbiter and a few select members of the Office of Naval Intelligence, they had almost always been on the other side. She even had the pleasure of ending the lives of many of them, and was one of the few beings, human or AI, that had a kill count comparable to the Master Chief. However, this was the first time she had actually been physically close to one, with the possible exception of the man in black, but she had only sensed that with him. With Roland she knew for certain.

While she would not exchange being able to touch, feel, taste, and smell (especially when it came to John) for anything, Cortana still

wished at that moment to have once again the relative safety that immaterialism provided. Roland had massacred an entire town of people, and there were possibly other towns that had met the same fate as Tull at the end of his hard calibers. He was dangerous, and she was not about to forget that. She would never forget that.

"If you are going to follow us then I would know all you can tell me about your world Reach," the gunslinger said, as he started to walk beside her.

"I wouldn't say we are following you people so much as we just happen to be going to the same place," Cortana said snarkily, attempting to match Roland's long strides.

"But you do not know the way do you say?"

"No, "

"Then you are following us, "

"Well then maybe you should tell us the way and we can get out of your hair. We don't really like the idea of being around you people any more than you like being around us." At this Roland glanced at her and then looked up at the sky.

"We follow the path of the beam," he said and then pointed up. "Can you see it?" Cortana looked and at first she couldn't. The white clouds were floating lazily overhead across the deep ocean blue sky, occasionally blocking out the sun, creating a cascade of shadows that rolled over the open meadow they were now traveling across. Then out of the chaos she suddenly saw order. In a straight line arcing from horizon to horizon the whiffs of cloud were being tugged along by some invisible force. Cortana looked down and noticed that the leaves, grass, and even the wind itself seemed to be blowing gently along the path of the beam. She looked to either side and could see no similar effect occurring. No, this force was only working along the path that they were currently walking.

"Yes, I see it," she breathed trying her best not to sound awestruck. Roland nodded.

"You would have to travel thousands of wheels to find the next beam, so for now we are following the same path, until ka decides differently."

"What is ka?" she asked, beginning to get annoyed with this word. Next to boredom the one thing she hated more than anything else was when somebody knew something she didn't. It was one of the personality quirks that all AIs shared.

"In your language the words most similar to ka would be luck or fate, but while that describes some of the aspects of ka, it is much more than that. Ka is a wheel, do you know it? Always turning. Ka like the wind."

"Vague much?"

"No," said the gunslinger. "Now tell me about Reach."

"Fine, but don't think I'm letting you off the hook." She took a

breath, this story was going to be a long one. "Well first off Reach was only one of the worlds under the jurisdiction of the UNSC. Before the war there were over 800 worlds that had been colonized by humanity. Nearly half were glassed by the Covenant. For, certain reasons, my access to UNSC archives was limited after the end of the war so I'm not sure exactly just how many worlds were left."

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"Hey, Eddie you didn't happen to see where Oy went off to?" Jake asked. He didn't look worried, merely curious.

"No I haven't, not since before big green over here decided to pull a gun us, or whatever the hell that thing is." Eddie replied. He was pushing Susannah's wheelchair skillfully along, almost absentmindedly avoiding roots, holes, and the occasional large rock.

"It is called a light rifle," John said. He decided that he didn't like Eddie at all. Jake was alright; Cortana seemed to like him and that was enough. There was something about Susannah that seemed off to the Master Chief although he couldn't quite place what it was, but she was polite enough to at least be tolerable. Eddie, however, just talked endlessly, often about things that made no logical sense at all. Avery Johnson had talked the Spartan's ear off when he was alive, but he at least knew the difference between when John was just being his normal quiet self and when he genuinely wanted to be left alone. Cortana was like that too to an extent, although he always made an effort to talk to her even when he didn't feel like it.

"You going to go look for him?" Susannah asked.

"Yeah, I'm going to go see what he's getting into," and with that Jake peeled off from the path and disappeared into the tree line.

"Who is Oy?" asked John. He really didn't feel like having to deal with another person.

"He is Jake's pet billybumbler, sort of like a cross between a dog, a raccoon, and a badger," said Susannah. She was leaning back in her wheelchair, her head lying against Eddie's right arm.

"I assume you know that there are more people following you." John had had been hearing the other group moving behind them for most of the day. Whoever those people were, they were worse at keeping quiet than he had originally thought. They seemed to be making sure to break every single branch and leaf, and scrape against every single tree they came across. He wished that they would either just give up and leave or pluck up enough courage to quit their painfully pathetic attempts at concealment to come and speak to them. Maybe John could take Cortana and slip away back into the woods while the gunslingers were distracted. Find their own way to The Dark Tower, whatever it might be, and back home.

"Yes we know, not very good are they?"

"No, "

"Don't worry about Jake, he's old enough to take care of himself, and

these people aren't dangerous."

"I wasn't worried," John said flatly. He noticed Eddie look at the Energy Sword at his side again. He had been doing so for the past ten minutes. The man began to speak and the Master Chief twitched a finger. _He is doing that thing with his mouth again, _he thought.

"So what are you doing with that dumbbell on your hip, thinking about doing a bit of a workout while we're walking?"

"It's not a dumbbell."

"Then what is it?"

"An Energy Sword."

"What's an Energy Sword?"

The Master Chief reached down and grabbed the device. He flicked his wrist and it activated, the plasma forming around the magnetic fields that gave the sword its unique double pronged shape. Eddie gapped at it and could not hide the excitement in his voice.

"It's a light saber!"

"A light saber?"

"Yeah you know from Star Wars."

"What's Star Wars? Never mind I don't need to know," the Master Chief stopped Eddie before he could answer his question. He had hoped that showing the Energy Sword might satisfy his curiosity enough to keep him from asking anything else. Unfortunately it didn't work.

"So how do they work?"

"That's classified." It wasn't really the truth. ONI Section Three had never been able to fully figure out what made the Covenant blades work, but explaining all that would have required more talking than the Chief was willing to do.

"Mr. Mysterious huh? Well it does look a lot different, but it's a light saber alright. I'll never forget the first time I saw Star Wars in the movie theatre when my older brother took me to go see it." Eddie reached out to grab the handle of the blade but the Master Chief quickly pulled it back.

"Do not touch, unless you want to lose a few fingers." He could sense Roland's eyes had wandered over to look at the sword. _Good_, John thought. He flicked his wrist again and it deactivated. _Maybe Cortana did get the better end of this deal_.

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Cortana had given a much more abridged version of the war with the Covenant than she had originally planned. Roland had said almost nothing while she was talking, asking questions only when he needed her to clarify what certain things were or meant, and would often roll two of his fingers impatiently, indicating that he wanted her to

speed the tale up. It didn't help that she sometimes had to stop talking and go into her unconscious data streams that were still holed up somewhere in the back of her mind. The first time she did this was one of the only times that the gunslinger's face had shown any emotion throughout her resuscitation of the war. His eyebrow had cocked slightly and the wavy lines along his forehead wrinkled. Only mild curiosity. _I'm going to have to limit how much I do this in front of them, _she thought.

He had shown no wonder or amazement at the technology that the UNSC possessed, and certainly had shown no emotion as she detailed how the Covenant juggernaut had destroyed one human world after another. It took her a while before she realized what he was doing. He was analyzing her. She, who had come from an advanced space faring civilization that had colonized hundreds of worlds and had waged war across the Orion arm of the Milky Way, was being studied by a man who, judging by the gear he carried, looked like he had come from a society that had just barely begun industrialization. For the first time it occurred to her that from the perspective of whatever civilization Roland had come from, she and John were the backward barbarians.

He had shown emotion only two other times, and both times he had simply given another look of mild curiosity. Once when John had activated his Energy Sword, and again when she mentioned the Battle of Jericho VII.

"You were in a battle like that, weren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, but they are similar in name only," the gunslinger replied, and subconsciously he rubbed his right hand against the horn strapped around his shoulders.

He remembered that day, would remember it always. He and the last surviving gunslingers of Gilead had been trapped upon the summit of Jericho Hill by an army that had vastly outmatched them in strength of numbers. They were the soldiers of John Farson, the man who had led a rebellion against the Inner Baronies and had raised the city of Gilead to the ground. However, while they may have been his men, Roland knew who really commanded them. The gunslinger had seen him slip in and out between the ranks of soldiers like a phantom throughout the course of the battle; the man in black, the top lieutenant of The Crimson King.

(Greetings Cousin. I Am The Destroyer Of Worlds.)

It was the dark man who had struck his friend Cuthbert in the eye with an arrow. It was Cuthbert who with his last breaths had blown the Horn of Gilead as the gunslingers made their last suicidal charge, hundreds of men falling before their hail of gunfire before they were overcome. Roland was the only one to have survived the battle, had clawed his way up from under a large pile of fallen corpses. He had paused just long enough to retrieve the Horn of Gilead from Cuthbert's dead hands before he began his great pursuit of the man in black; into the town of Tull, through the Mohaine Desert, to the way station, under the mountains, and to the western sea beyond.

"When you escaped the destruction of Reach, your ship went through a thinny, what you call slip-space correct?" Roland asked.

"Yes, The Pillar of Autumn was one of the few ships to escape."

Roland nodded his head, "The dark man told me on the edge of the western sea that The Old People, the ones that came before the rise of Gilead, had managed to walk on the moon, cure the disease-which-rots; what your people call cancer, and even begin to chip away at the fabric of reality itself. At the time I thought he was lying, but with Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and now you and your companion it seems as though what he said was true."

Cortana looked at him. This was the most he had spoken during the entire time she had been talking. A cold tingling filled her spine. It had unnerved her enough when she noticed that Roland had the same eyes as John, but now it seemed as if they almost had the same personalities. _No, they are not the same. John may be rough around the edges, but he is still a good person. Roland is, well I don't know what he is, but he is not my Spartan, _Cortana thought.

"Did you ever catch him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you let him go?"

"No. I had thought him dead." Roland moved his gaze towards Cortana's feet, "We'll finish your tale later, you have been limping for half a wheel."

She too looked down at her feet. Cortana had tried to hide the pain, to ignore it, but her feet had gone raw against the inadequate boots she wore, and the familiar shaking had returned to her legs. Still she said, "I'm fine," yet no sooner were those words spoken when her legs finally gave out. She never saw Roland's hand move. It had simply been by his side and then reappeared under her arm, propping her up. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a green blur move towards them. _No not again, not in front of these people_. This time she didn't even have a chance to let out a protest as John removed Roland's hand from her and picked her up.

"You are done talking," he said. If Roland was angry about the Spartan yanking his arm he didn't show it. Cortana thought that all things considered John has shown amazing restraint by not attempting to rip it off.

Instead the gunslinger spoke to Cortana, "Thankee sai for speaking with me. We will finish your tale later," and with that he walked back to Eddie and Susannah. Once he was gone John spoke.

"Are you okay?"

Cortana huffed angrily at him "Do you try to embarrass me on purpose or do you just not know any better?" John didn't reply, he merely took the assault rifle from her hands and placed it on his back and then began to walk. She regretted her outburst when she noticed his shoulders sag.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"It's fine," he said.

"No it's not John," she looked up at him and tried to find his eyes through his visor, but he didn't look back at her.

They had continued walking for several kilometers in silence before John spoke to her again. "Do you trust them?" he asked. Cortana thought for a moment.

"Well I don't think they are going to try and kill us in our sleep or anything like that, so long as they don't see us as a threat, and I don't think they have lied to us, although we don't really have enough to go on to definitively say whether or not they are."

"You didn't answer my question."

Cortana frowned, "I don't know to be honest." John nodded.

"Neither do I." Several moments passed before he asked another question. "Cortana what is Star Wars?"

"Star Wars?"

"Yes, it's a movie that Eddie Dean says he saw back during his time period. Apparently my Energy Sword is similar to a weapon portrayed in the film."

"Ok, give me a second," and she dived back into the steam of data. Nearly five minutes passed before she opened her eyes again.

"John I can't find any movie by that name. It doesn't exist."

â€

Jake Chambers returned to the group, his arms filled with what looked like black berries with horns sticking out of them. The vaguely dog looking Oy was at his heels yipping. He talked with his ka-tet for a few minutes, and Cortana smiled as he walked over to her and John.

"I found these things called muffin balls. Roland said that they were good to eat so we are going to cook them for dinner. I asked and it's ok for you guys to join if you want," he looked at Cortana as he said this and seemed a little nervous.

_Poor guy, _he_ probably doesn't get to see a whole lot of girls out here, _she thought.

A bright light flashed, filling her vision with a tie dye of colors all swirling together. She saw Jake, but he was different. His clothes were tattered and dirty, the nervous smile was gone from his face, and blood was dripping from his forehead. He spoke.

The gunslinger is the truth

_ Roland is the truth_

_ The way station is the truth_

_ We went under the mountains and that is the truth_

_ Roland let me die. That is the truth_

_ I still love him_

_ That is the truth_

Then as suddenly as the vision came it vanished. Jake was there looking at her expectantly. Cortana managed a smile "I'd love to."

â€|

Muffin balls were known to cause strange dreams. That is what Roland had said, and since she was having dreams that were crazy enough at night it made her a little apprehensive to eat them. Still she had eaten a few just to be polite. She winked at Jake and said, "Thanks for the food. My Spartan has certainly never taken me out to dinner; makes a girl feel special." Jake had blushed blood red at this and Eddie nudged him gently on the shoulder. Cortana gathered up the remainder of her share as well as John's and brought them to him. He was standing ten meters from the camp sight, looking outward.

When they had stopped for the night John had taken off her boots. The bottom of her feet were completely torn up from blisters and he told her that she wouldn't be allowed to walk on them for a few days as he applied a layer of biofoam and wrapped them in bandages that he had retrieved from one of his armor compartments. After he was finished he muttered something about going on watch and had slipped away from the light of the newly lit fire.

"I have dinner," Cortana said as she approached him.

"You're not supposed to be walking," he said, not turning around.

"And how else were you going to get your food? Certainly weren't going to come get it yourself were you?"

"No," then he did something she had not seen him do in ages. He brought his hands up to his helmet and pulled it off. His hair had grayed significantly since the last time she saw it. The majority of his head was still covered light brown, but not by much, and his light blue eyes at lost much of their shine. Cortana felt a pang of guilt. _Was this because of me?_

She forced the thought down and handed him the muffin balls. "I'm pretty full so you can have the rest of my share," she said trying her best not to look worried. "They're pretty good, but make sure you pull off the little horns or they'll tasteâ€|" John popped a large handful in his mouth and began to chew, "sour," she finished. He shrugged.

"I've never been big on taste,"

"I would think not, I've seen what you're willing to eat." She watched as John finished his meal. He was about to put his helmet back on when she stopped him with her arm. She brought her other hand up against his cheek, "I'm taking first watch tonight, and I'll sit

on my butt the whole time if it makes you happy. You go get some sleep." The Master Chief put his hand up to her arm and squeezed gently, then pulled her hand down away from his face. Without a word he put his helmet back on, handed over what had become her assault rifle, and walked away.

6. Chapter 6

Chapter 6: A Spartan in New York

_John stood on the sidewalk. The feeling of warm spring air against his skin alerted him to the fact that he was no longer wearing his armor. He looked down and saw he was wearing standard issue UNSC PT gear and plain white tennis shoes on his feet. He couldn't remember the last time he had worn something other than his armor; he had only been out of his Mark VI on board the Infinity long enough to be fitted with the new Mark VII. Cairo Station perhaps? Yes that was the last time, he had gone a week without wearing it and it was miserable. _

Where am I? Why am I wearing this? He thought. The air smelled of gasoline and it invaded his protesting nostrils. He looked up and saw he was surrounded by people, but none of them gave the slightest hint that they knew he was there. The most they would do was walk around him, some even going so far as to step out onto the street to avoid running into him. The street itself was filled with cars that he only vaguely remembered seeing in one of DÃ©jÃ 's classes when she was still teaching the young Spartans basic Earth history and that of her colonies. The street itself was flanked by buildings, concrete trees sprouting up from the concrete floor of the city. _Small_, he thought, _too small for a city this densely populated.

_ "He you, big guy, over here." John turned and frowned when he saw Eddie Dean sitting on a set of stairs leading up to one of the buildings. Beside him was Jake Chambers, and Oy was there too. Eddie himself had not been surprised to see Jake and Oy, although he thought he probably should have. It did surprise him, however, to see the Spartan sharing his dream, or whatever the hell this really was. When he had first seen the Master Chief without his armor, Eddie had initially mistaken him as Roland. Yet after a few seconds he realized how ridiculous his initial observation was. The physical differences between the gunslinger and the Spartan were many. The Master Chief easily stood five to six inches taller than Roland, had graying hair as opposed to the gunslinger's dark brown, and was covered in muscle. The gunslinger was strong, but not superhumanly so. The Master Chief's body, however, almost looked as if it had been designed, as though someone had purposely crafted _(augmented)_ it so that he would be far stronger than any normal person. _

_"Your name wouldn't happen to be Sahara double-one seven would it?" Eddie continued. _It's the way he stands and moves around, _Eddie thought, _it's almost exactly like Roland. That and his eyes.

_ "It's Sierra 117." John said. _

_ "Hmm, well I guess you really aren't a robot." _

_ "No I'm not, and just call me Master Chief." _

_ "Cheef," Oy barked. John cocked his head at the billybumbler and raised his eyes up to meet Jake._

_ "It can talk?" he asked. _

_ "Only a few words, but yes he can. It's a billybumbler thing," Jake said. A beaming smile was plastered on his face. John nodded his head and then gestured slightly with his hand at their surroundings. _

_ "Where are we?"_

_ "We're home," Jake said, still wearing the smile, "Well at least me and Eddie are. This is New York, 1977." John cocked an eyebrow._

_ "How are you so sure about the date?"_

_ "Saw it on a newspaper." _

_ A sharp turn of Eddie's head caught the Spartan's eye before he too saw what had caught the man's attention. Coming up behind Jake and Oy on the sidewalk was yet another Jake Chambers. He was younger, and was wearing far cleaner clothes, but it was Jake nonetheless. The younger Jake who looked as if he was lost in deep paradoxical thought, paid no attention to the three people who by all rights shouldn't be within ten thousand worlds of New York City as he stepped around his older twin and then actually climbed up a few of the steps to get past John who was taking up most of the walkway. John looked at Eddie who had his jaw hanging open, and then to Jake.

_

_ "Care to explain?" he asked. _

_ "Well that's me, the past me I mean, before I went back to mid-world," Jake replied._

_ "Was this before or after you died the second time?"_

_ "After," Jake said, his smile faltering. _

_John saw how much mentioning his second death, _as if dying once isn't enough_, troubled the boy and mentally he scolded himself. Cortana would be cross with him if she knew how much he upset Jake and he briefly wondered why she had taken such a strong liking to the boy so quickly. _

"_I think we should follow him, I mean me, I mean the other me," he said and John was relieved to see that his smile had returned.

_

"_You mean the you that looks like he has taken a shower in the last 24 hours?" Eddie asked. _

"_Yeah,"_

"_Well I can't think of anything better to do," Eddie stood up and stretched his legs before hopping down off the stairs. "You coming too Chief?"_

"_Like you said I have nothing better to do," the Master Chief replied._

â€|

_ "So how do you like New York Chief?" Eddie asked._

"_It's dirty," the Master Chief replied. Eddie looked around as if noticing the dirt, grime, litter, and smog that the city seemed to continually produce for the first time._

"_Yeah, but I think it adds character."_

_They had been following past Jake for two blocks. Future Jake said that he knew where his past self was heading, to a book store called The Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind which was owned by a man named Calvin Tower. There he would buy two books, Charlie the Choo-Choo and a book of riddles. John had never heard of Charlie the Choo-Choo but judging by the name he guess what kind of book it was. He had to bring his hand up briefly to his face and rub his temples in frustration. _

"_You mean you were about to engage in cross-dimensional traveling and all you could think to bring was two children's books?" he said.

_

"_Well I also brought by Dad's ruger pistol with me, but I wouldn't knock those two books if I were you. They saved our lives. I'll show them to you once we get back to mid-world, then you'll understand," Jake had said. John wondered how exactly they were supposed to get back to mid-world, but then remembered that since this was supposedly a dream; _a very vivid dream _he thought, they would simply wake up. Then of course the question of exactly how to wake up came to his mind. _

"_We're here," Jake said as they stopped in front of the book store just moments after past Jake had walked in_. _Posted outside the store was a chalkboard which read_:

TODAY'S SPECIALS

From Mississippi! Pan-Fried William Faulkner

Hardcovers Market Price Vintage Library Paperbacks 75 cents each

From Maine! Chilled Stephen King

Hardcovers Market Price

Book Club Bargains

Paperbacks 75 cents each

From California! Hard-Boiled Raymond Chandler

Hardcovers Market Price

Paperbacks 7 for \$5.00

_John filed in after the others and immediately spotted past Jake who was scanning a table that had twenty-one books on it. He walked up

behind the younger version of the boy and looked for the books that were mentioned earlier. It took him only a few seconds to find Charlie the Choo-Choo which he saw had been written by Claudia y Inez Bachman._

_ "That's not right," the Jake from mid-world said who had walked up next to John, the smile having long faded from his face._

_ "What's not right?"_

_ "The author of the book is supposed to be Beryl Evans, not Claudia y Inez Bachman."_

_ "Perhaps you're remembering the name wrong." Jake looked at the Spartan, his face had turned to stone._

_ "I wouldn't forget something like that," his voice had become that of a man far older than the boy who now stood in front of John. They watched as past Jake bought the books and then began to talk with owner of the book store, Calvin Tower. _

_ "We're wasting our time here. If we've been brought back to your world then we're supposed to accomplish something, not just sit here and look around," John said. _

_ Jake sighed, "We are supposed to watch me buy these books."_

_ "You already watched yourself buying the books once; there is no need to see it again."_

_ Jake shook his head, "No this time is different. The author of the book is different."_

_ "And?"

>Jake looked at him and to the Master Chief's surprise he smiled, "The past me is going to see the rose next. You should see the rose." He then added in a low whisper as he turned back to look at the conversation they had been watching, "You need to see the rose."

_ "All I'm interested in is getting me and Cortana back home. I don't see how a flower is going to help with that."_

_ "You know you're just as unimaginative as Roland. In fact I think your worse," it was Eddie who had spoken this time. The Master Chief walked away from the two of them at this. He didn't want to be compared with that man. _He grabbed Cortana, _he thought and felt a low feeling in his gut that he had not experienced since being aboard the bridge of the UNSC Infinity on Requiem over seven months ago.

_

_ John scanned the books on the shelves of the store but paid little attention to the titles, until one in particular caught his eye. He stood staring at the title of the book for several long moments before he sensed the door of the store open up behind him. He checked to see who had come in; his mind already working out whether or not they were threats despite the fact that he knew nobody else in this world could see him except Eddie, Jake, and Oy. They were three men, all armed although they were trying to conceal it, but what truly got the Spartan's attention was the look of recognition he saw on Eddie

Dean's face. _He knows these people_, John thought. He scanned the store for past Jake but didn't see him. The Master Chief frowned, _How did I not notice him leave?

_As the armed group of three walked into the store John instinctively moved to put himself between the door and these men, even though his conscious mind knew it wasn't necessary. He watched as they began to speak to the owner of the store, Calvin Tower. The Spartan tried to hear what they said, but couldn't. There were chimes ringing in his ears and the noise was drowning out everything else. Eddie turned to talk to him, but John just saw his mouth move, no words coming out. The chimes and bells grew louder as he watched Jake and Eddie follow the three men and Calvin Tower into one of the back rooms. He attempted to go with them, but found that his legs wouldn't move. The world seemed wrong, it _(the world has moved on)_ was darker than before, the sunlight itself seemed to only add to it. His eyes lost focus._

â€|

In the beginning there was nothing, and the shapeless void filled the darkness. Master Chief Petty Officer Sierra 117 stood in the darkness. Around him he could sense movement, ancient creatures, hungry, slithering and sliding their bodies into one intangible mass. John reached for a weapon but found he had none. They encroached on him, their bodies materializing into hard shadows. The Spartan raised his fists, feet slid shoulder length apart, right foot slightly behind the left. The black demons of the mists were almost upon him, reaching out their shapeless hands. Then they recoiled suddenly, as if afraid. John heard their babbling speech, thousands of different languages and dialects being spoken at once. Out of the chaos he heard one word.

"_Reclaimer"_

_ Pure white light flooded the void, felling legion before it, and John was consumed by it. _

â€|

Cortana had been on watch for three hours when she first heard the noise. The moon seemed to be acting normal tonight and she had little trouble using it to keep track of the time. At first she thought it was a branch snapping, perhaps the result of one of the members of the group that was following them being more careless in their movements than usual. Then she heard it again, this time the noise resembled the crackling of electricity. She searched for the source of the noise and found it.

John, who had fallen asleep much like the night before against a tree with his arms crossed, was fading in and out of existence. When his body disappeared a faint glow would replace him, and then with a sharp crack he would flicker back into the material world. Panicking she ran to him. As she ran Cortana saw that Jake, Eddie and Oy were also flickering in and out. Cortana knelt down next to her Spartan, hands outstretched, ready to wake him the next time he flickered back into existence.

"Don't do that," it was Roland, he was standing on the other side of the now dying fire, smoke rolling out of the end of his newly lit

cigarette. "They have gone todash, traveled into another world. Attempting to wake them now could be dangerous."

"So I'm supposed to just sit here and do nothing?" Cortana said. Her voice nearly broke.

"Yes." Cortana eyed him angrily.

(He let Jake die. The boy loves him as a father and Roland let him die) Cortana pushed down the voices inside her. The rampant voices had returned to her after she saw the vision of Jake with his face covered in blood. Sometimes they were only whispers, and other times they were so loud that she would look over her shoulder as if somebody was behind her. This was different though. Before the voices had been fighting each other, thousands of them clawing at one another. This time they were one.

"I thought you said there were only three ways to travel between worlds," she snapped, turning back to John.

"Death, doorway, and thinny are the only three that I have seen personally. Until now I had only ever heard of todash." Roland said his voice impassive. Faint movement caught the gunslinger's attention and Cortana saw Susannah seemingly awaken, pull herself into her wheelchair, and then roll off into the woods, oblivious of what was going on with the others.

"Where is she going?" Cortana asked.

"To feed, she is with child."

"Susannah is pregnant?"

Roland shook his head, "No, but the person inside of her is. She calls herself Mia the daughter of none. "He then cut his eyes to the tracks that the wheelchair had left in the dirt, "In the language of Gilead, Mia means mother," his mouth twitch into a half frown as he said it.

Cortana clenched her hands tighter on her assault rifle and briefly thought about aiming it at the gunslinger, "And you didn't think to tell us that one of the members in your group is an insane woman who goes out in the middle of the night to feed on who knows what?" She motioned to the still crackling and flickering bodies of Jake and Eddie, "Do they know?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Eddie is in love with Susannah, he wouldn't listen to the truth even if I told him, even if he saw it for himself. Jake sees her as a mother. He doesn't need to know at this point that Mia exists. " Roland said before he flicked the remainder of his cigarette into the dying embers of the fire.

(Lovers and friends lie endlessly. Only equals may speak the truth.)
Enough! Cortana shouted at the voices and they seemed to cower.
Good let them be afraid of me she thought.

Roland eyed her strangely. For a moment he thought he saw a flash of red in Cortana's eyes. "I'm going to keep an eye on her," he said.

"Fine, I'll wait here for the Chief and the others to come back." Her eyes had returned to John and she reached out a hand, letting it hover over his flickering form.

"There is no telling how long they will be in todash," Roland said. He wasn't trying to dissuade her; it was just a simple statement of fact.

"I've waited longer for him to wake up," she said softly.

â€|

Hours later the Master Chief and the others had become fully solid again. Cortana watched it happen, their bodies giving off one last electric crack as the rematerialized for good. She then laid her head down on her Spartan's chest and listened for the soft drumming of his heartbeat. When she found it she lifted her head up and sat down with her back up against the tree opposite his. _I'll keep watch for the rest of the night_, she thought, _John can sleep. _

7. Chapter 7

Chapter 7: The Lives and Deaths of Jake Chambers

But sleep did come for Cortana, as much as she wished against it, and as hard she fought to keep awake. Icy hands pressed down on her eyelids, not gentle, but hard and unsympathetic. This was not normal sleep, this she knew; it was coming on against her too rough and forceful to be normal. Something or someone wanted her to sleep. At first she thought she was going todash as well, and fought even harder at the thought. _No I need to stay here, keep watch for him, _her mind yelled.

(No not todash) the voices whispered to her.

Then what? What is this? she asked them.

(Ask the man in black. He knows. He has something to show you.) That was the last thing she heard before sleep finally conquered her. That and the sound of the bells.

â€|

_ She was in New York 1977, as John and the others had been, standing on the street corner. The woman saw a young boy walking through the crowd skillfully and immediately recognized him. _Jake_, she thought. He was different then how she knew him in mid-world; cleaner, younger, and better fed. The look on his face wasn't quite happiness, but rather simple contentment. Then she saw the other man. He was wearing dark clothes and a cross around his neck, and under that the collar of a priest. The darkly dressed man was moving swiftly towards Jake and the woman tried to call out a warning, but it was too late. The boy was pushed forcefully out onto the street. A speeding car struck Jake's side and she saw blood come out of his mouth. He landed on the hard asphalt. _

_ A crowd gathered around the boy and the dark man pushed easily through them. "Stand back I'm a priest, he needs his last rites" he said and knelt down by Jake's dying body. To everyone else standing there the dark man's face had a look of concern, but to Cortana she saw the hint of amusement. The non-priest, for how could a man like this ever consider himself to be holy; _The Covenant did, _she thought; began to mumble words Cortana couldn't hear. The boy turned his head away from the dark man's face, and his eyes glazed over.

-

â€|

I'm back, _she thought, _I'm back at the way station. _The old worn wood buildings and hard pan desert floor were exactly as they had been when Cortana had last been there, with two notable and very important exceptions. The gunslinger was there, Roland, with both blue steeled revolvers strapped to his hips, water skins and the Horn of Gilead hanging from straps draped over his shoulders, his right hand still had all its fingers. Jake was there as well, his lips cracked from dehydration, his thin frame showing the obvious signs of malnourishment. _

He must have been here for days, _she thought, _waiting for what? For him?

"_You're not going to just leave me here are you?" Jake asked the gunslinger. _

"_No, I'm not," Roland replied. _

â€|

_ When she first saw the darkness, Cortana thought she was in the space between dreams and the waking world, and sighed a little in relief. Then she noticed the feeling of dampness and hard rock on her bare feet. A sliver of light from the cave's exit _(not a cave, you are under the mountains) _caught her eye, and there standing in the light was the man in black. _

_ "Hile gunslinger," he said. Roland's hand was a blur as he brought his revolver up and fired, the small explosion of gunpowder that spilled forth from the long gun briefly illuminating the underground like a flash of lightning. His other hand was holding on to Jake who was dangling over the edge of a broken bridge. "You can save the boy or catch me gunslinger, but you cannot do both," and with that the man in black left them. _

_ Cortana knew what was about to happen, Jake had told her so in the vision. She ran, ignoring the sharp rocks stabbing at her feet. She reached out for the boy's arm but her hand passed right through. The gunslinger and Jake were looking at each other. _

_ "Go then, there are other worlds than these," Jake said, but there was no anger in his voice, not even resentment, just sad resignation. Roland let him drop into the abyss. _

â€|

_ The brightness of the classroom lights nearly blinded her, and

Cortana had to blink hard for her vision to come back to normal. Sitting at a desk in the middle of the classroom was a very much alive Jake Chambers. His head was in both hands, and his eyes were unfocused. A child sitting next to him tried to get his attention, calling out his name several times before finally giving up. Jake had died, gone to mid-world where he died again, and now was alive again sitting in English class. His mind was beginning to break under the strain. _

And who wouldn't, _ Cortana thought_, who wouldn't break under that kind of stress? _She walked over to him, and although she knew she could not touch Jake, Cortana let her hand hover above his head. She looked at his desk and saw that there was an essay that the boy had written sitting there. The title read_

_ My Understanding of the Truth By: John Chambers. _

John, _she thought, _John!

_She quickly looked back at the boy's face, although she knew already what it looked like, and had to crane her neck a little in order to see it. He looked almost completely different from the John she knew. His hair was blonde not brown, he lacked the freckles and gap between his teeth that John 117 had when he was a child, and he was nearly twice age John had been when he was kidnapped by Dr. Halsey to become part of the Spartan II program. _

_ Yet, she had met a man very similar to her John in mid-world. A man named Roland who, although physically very different, had the same eyes, same posture and even a similar personality. Now Cortana had found that he also had what could only be described as an adopted son, who was named John also. She continued to read the essay. There were two quotes below the title, one by T.S. Eliot and another by Robert Browning. She ignored those though and read the first two lines._

_ The gunslinger is the truth_

_ Roland is the truth_

_ She continued to read but the rest was complete gibberish. A pretentious writer or English teacher might be impressed by this incoherent stream of consciousness. Anybody else would try to have him committed. Cortana continued to read and her eyes caught a few lines in the middle of the paper. _

I want to go back and that is the truth

I have to go back and that is the truth

I'll go crazy if I don't go back and that is the truth

_Her hand that had been hovering over his head went to his cheek. His eyes were still looking off into some faraway place. "I will take care of you; I will take care of you both. I won't let you die again," she whispered to him. _

â€|

_ The cracked and dry wood in the house was eerily similar to that of

the way station. Jake was there and he was running for his life. A shiver of fear ran up Cortana's spine and she ran with him. Looking behind her shoulder the first thought she had was that the flood was following them. This creature was different though, it was made of wood, and the beams of the house itself seemed to be gathering together to form the creature's body. Jake ran through the house, weaving in and out of the narrow corridors before finally finding a door, a door that was very similar to the one she found at the way station. He opened it and a rough hand grabbed his shoulder pulling him through back into mid-world._

_ For a moment she saw Roland, arms wrapped around Jake. If she didn't know any better she would have said that he was crying, small crystal balls of tears forming in the corners of his eyes. The door slammed in her face, and Cortana turned around. The creature _ (The Doorkeeper) _ looked at her, it could see her. It let out a roar, the voice being formed by wood scraping and splintering against each other. The creature pounced. _

â€|

The Spartan opened his eyes and felt a light pressure on his arm. Cortana was leaning against him, her arm wrapped around his middle. John sighed. He didn't blame her for not being able to stay awake all night, she wasn't trained to do that, and he guessed that she had already pushed her new body far beyond its limits already. If anything he blamed himself for not waking up to let her sleep. _One of us should always be keeping watch_, he thought, _especially with these people._ Gently he lifted up her arm and laid her body on the ground. Cortana shivered slightly at the touch of his cold armor, but remained asleep. It was early morning and the sun was still a soft pink, hovering just above the horizon. Roland was already awake and walked over to the Spartan, his boots making a soft thud on the ground.

"We need to palaver about what you, Jake, and Eddie saw last night," he said. He rolled a cigarette as he said this. He struck a match to light it and the fire briefly lit up his otherwise emotionless features.

"You know about the dream?" John asked as he stood up and put his body between the gunslinger and Cortana.

"It was hard not to miss, she saw it as well," he then looked at the others who were still sleeping. "I'll wake them up. We must finish our palaver quickly. I have a feeling that the others will be coming to talk with us soon."

"And why should we talk at all with you?" John asked.

The gunslinger glanced back at him and their light blue eyes found one another. "Because if you went todash like I suspect, then it probably has something to do with The Dark Tower. If you are looking for it too, then you would listen to what we have to say."

8. Chapter 8

Chapter 8: I Deal in Lead

The fire, which had become little more than charcoal and dying embers, was built back up into a roaring flame in order to stave off the new morning's cold air. Roland's ka-tet was sitting in a circle around the fire, and Cortana sat next to Jake who had Oy in his lap and was scratching his ears. She looked at him and briefly thought about his broken and dying body laying in the streets of New York, and then of Roland letting him fall under the mountains. John "Jake" Chambers looked back at her and smiled. She returned it. Her John was standing apart from the group, his arms crossed. Personally she didn't blame him.

"Eddie, tell me what you and the others saw last night when you went todash." It was Roland who said this.

"Alright, but first what's todash?" Eddie asked.

"Traveling in between worlds, much like we have done with the doorways and thinnies. I suspect that they are all very much the same."

"How many worlds have you been to?" Cortana asked. She tried to look at the gunslinger, but found she couldn't, not after what she had seen him do to Jake. Roland regarded her for a moment.

"Many. Eddie you are better at telling tales than me. Tell them about the City of Lud and Topeka."

"Okay, well when we came to Lud; this was after we dragged Jake back into mid-world the second time, it was falling apart, had fallen apart. It was built by The Old People of Roland's world and was filled with a whole bunch of ancient and barely working technology," Cortana was reminded of the Forerunners back in their reality, "I think the dark man was there. We couldn't see him but I think I could sense his presence," he broke a twig in half and stared at the fire, his eyes lost focus, remembering what he had seen in the city.

"I think I could sense him too," Jake said, also tossing a twig in.

"Too" Oy repeated and Jake gave him an approving pat on the head.

Eddie smirked a little, "There see what I mean? Anyway the people there were going nuts, killing each other, killing themselves, trying to kill us as a matter of fact. We barely managed to escape, had to kill a lot of people in order to do so, and that's when we got on Blaine the monorail." The name Blaine seemed vaguely familiar to Cortana. She remembered reading it in Jake's essay during last night's dream.

"Blaine is a pain," Jake said and Oy repeated the word pain for him.

"Who's Blaine?" Cortana asked.

"He was the computer than ran the monorail, had been doing so for thousands of years. I guess he went a little crazy, just like the people of Lud. He said he was going to crash the train unless we could pose a riddle to him that he couldn't solve."

"Sounds like he went Rampant," Cortana said.

"What's Rampant?"

"In our world human AI's can only last seven years before they succumb to a process called rampancy. Forerunner AI's can last thousands of years, but they all eventually succumb to the process. Basically rampancy is when an AI begins to think itself to death, and often goes crazy during the process."

Jake's eyes were wide, "Did you ever come across Rampant AI's in your world?"

"Yes, his name was 343 Guilty Spark" _and me_, she finished the sentence in her mind.

"Did you come across any others?"

"No," it was John who said this and perhaps a bit too forcefully. Jake stared at the Spartan, but didn't look intimidated, just a little taken aback. Something in Jake's mind then clicked.

"Oh that's right I have to show you the books that I bought back in 1977," he then reached into a satchel and pulled out two worn out books. One was called Riddle-De-Dum and the other had an illustration of a smiling train on it. The riddle book's binding looked as if it was about to disintegrate. Jake held up Charlie the Choo-Choo to the Spartan and pointed at the book's author printed on the cover. "See I told ya. The author's name is Beryl Evans, not this Claudia y Inez Bachman."

"Still doesn't mean anything," the Spartan replied.

"You're wrong, it means a lot. I just don't know exactly what it is yet," he paused and then grabbed a burning stick, and with smoke still trailing from the end, wrote Claudia y Inez Bachman's name in large capital letters on the ground in front of him. "Cortana what was the name of that crazy robot you met again?"

"343 Guilty Spark."

"And his name is Sierra 117 right?" Jake pointed at the Spartan.

"Yes," Jake mumbled the numbers under his breath.

"And you guys come from the year 2557?"

"Yes, why are you asking?" Jake didn't reply, and instead wrote the numbers down, 343 and 117 next to each other, and 2557 underneath. Susannah and Eddie looked at what he had written and their eyes grew wide.

"That can't be," Eddie whispered.

"It could very well mean nothing," Roland said, his face remained impassive. If anything he looked bored.

"You know I really hate it when other people know things I don't," Cortana said, a little louder than she meant. Reflexively she went to

check her emotional subroutines, and then remembered she had none.
No just normal human emotion, she thought.

"We don't know yet," Jake said, "None of us do, and like Roland said it could mean nothing, but I think it does mean something. Maybe everything."

Cortana sighed heavily, "Fine. Jake can I see the train book for one second please?"

"Sure," and he handed the book over to Cortana who held it gently.

_Feels like this thing is about to fall apart. _"So this book warned you about Blaine?"

"Yeah, but I knew his name somehow before I even picked up the book." Cortana nodded and opened up to the front page and read the first few lines.

Bob Brookes was an engineer for the Mid-World Railway Companyâ€|

Cortana shut the book after reading that and put her head in her hands, "Tell me I didn't just read what I think I read." Jake was laughing at her.

"I had the same reaction when I first read it, so did the others." Cortana handed the book back to Jake and gave him a playful shove.

Cortana went back to rubbing her temples and said, "Ok so you bought a book in New York in 1977, which just so happens to mention mid-world and Blaine the mono. Seeing as how you guys are still alive I'm guessing you managed to come up with a riddle Blaine couldn't solve?"

"Actually Eddie did."

"Eddie?" the Master Chief said, his monotone voice holding an air of disbelief.

"Yeah, bet you didn't know I was good at riddles did ya big green? Want to hear one of the ones I used?"

"Not really, but I doubt that's going to stop you."

"Nope," Eddie smiled, "So Chief when is a door not a door?"

"I've heard that one. It's old, even in your time. The answer is when it's a jar."

Eddie shook his head, "Nope, the answer is when it's a garbage truck."

"That makes no sense," John said and his index finger twitched in irritation.

"Exactly,"

"And that's why I fell in love with you sugar, you are so illogical," Susannah said and Eddie wrapped his right arm around her and pulled her in close.

John shook his head disapprovingly, "Just tell us about Topeka," Eddie's smile faltered at this and Cortana guess John got at least a little satisfaction out of it.

"Well after getting off the mono we passed through one of those things Roland calls thinnies, rips between worlds. When we got to the other side we were in Topeka Kansas 1985, only it's not the Topeka I or any of the others knew. It was dead. Some sort of super flue wiped out everybody in the city, the whole country too, probably the whole world," he paused and then continued, "We read the newspapers there. They had the lists of the dead on them, pages long. He was there also, the dark man. Again we didn't see him, but the survivors left warnings. I guess towards the end they either figured out what was really going on, or sensed it. Either way it didn't do them much good."

(Watch Out for the Waking Dude. All Hail the Crimson King.) the voices inside Cortana said and again she forced them down, but it was getting harder to do so. "A super virus that could wipe out all of humanity in one go, bet the Covenant would have loved to get their hands on that," she said bitterly.

Eddie looked at her, his features sullen, "I am really sorry about what happened. Roland told me some of it."

The right side of Cortana's mouth twitched in a half grin, "I'll have to tell you the rest of it sometime, both of us will." Movement caught her eye and she saw that Roland was twirling his fingers.

"I'd rather get to you going todash before the day is over," he said.

"Right, sorry. Anyway, we went through Topeka and into another thinny. After that we wound up in," he looked at the ground and shook his head, "You're really not going to believe this."

"Try us," Cortana said.

"Oz"

"Oz?"

"Right, as in the Land of Oz,"

Cortana closed her eyes and skimmed the surface of her data streams, "You can't mean The Wizard of Oz?"

"The one and the same." At first Cortana thought it was another one of Eddie's jokes, but his face was far too serious for that. Even a person with the driest and most dead pan sense of humor imaginable could not maintain a face that straight. "Except it wasn't filled with munchkins, witches, or flying monkeys. It was empty, dead just like Topeka. He was there too, except he was actually there. That's when I saw the man in black in person for the first time.

"I just can't believeâ€¦". Cortana started before Roland cut her off.

"Enough with Oz Eddie, start talking about todash."

â€¦

Eddie Dean told them about todash, told them how they had woken up to find themselves in 1977 New York, about how the people in this version of the city had not been able to see them but yet could sense them, well enough to walk around and avoid them. He also told them how dark it had seemed.

"I don't remember it being dark, not till the very end," John said at this point.

"Hmm well me and Jake both noticed it was dark, even with the sun out. Not sure what it means thoughâ€¦"

"Just keep going,"

"Right,"

He then told them about seeing John out of his armor. Susannah had asked at this point what the Spartan looked like without it, but Roland stopped that conversation short, and for once John agreed with him. Eddie got to the point where they had followed Jake's past self into the book store when he gave the Master Chief a curious look.

"You started acting weird at that point Chief. You went off and started staring at a book in the corner of the store. Stared at it for about five minutes, wouldn't you say so Jake? Past Jake had already left at that point and we were about to go and try and shake you out of it."

"That probably would have been a bad idea," said Cortana dryly, "It's not healthy to sneak up on a Spartan." Eddie shook his head.

"We weren't sneaking up on him though. It was like he wasn't even in the book store anymore, lost in outer space, gone to Coney Island and not come back." He gave John the same curious look as before, "What book were you looking at?"

"Robert Browning's Men and Women," he said.

"That's, that's the guy I quoted in my English essay," Jake blurted out. Cortana tried to put on her best poker face, but she could feel John eyeing her. "Yeah, I think the quote I used was 'My first thought was, he lied in every word.' Are you sure that was the book you saw?"

Was he sure? He remembered clearly that it was Robert Browning's book, but he also remembered it being William Shakespeare's King Lear. Somehow both possibilities seemed equally true, as improbable as that may sound.

"Yes, I'm sure," he answered and it was Cortana's turn to eye him. "What about those three men that walked into the book store after that? You recognized them."

"Oh them?" Eddie said, "That was Enrico Balazar, a crime boss in Brooklyn, and two of his goons. Me and Roland kill them in 1987. I suppose you should hear that story at some point, but I got a feeling Roland doesn't want me to get more sidetracked than I already am."

"You're right, I don't" Eddie raised his hands in a supplicating gesture.

"This guy, wouldn't know a good story if it came up and bit him. Anyway after that Balazar took the owner Calvin Tower into the back of the store, tried to strong arm him. Tower owns a vacant lot where the rose is kept, Jake told you a little bit about the rose. Seems that Tower signed an agreement nearly a year back for \$100,000 to not sell the lot and then give something called the Sombra Corporation first dibs on offering to buy it when the year is up. My guess is that Balazar was sent to try and intimidate Tower into selling the vacant lot."

"And I suppose this rose is important somehow?" John asked.

"It is either a representation of The Dark Tower in that version of New York, is somehow The Dark Tower itself, or is a doorway that leads to it. At this point we don't know for certain. What we do know is that the agents of The Crimson King, which it seems the Sombra Corporation is a part of, have a vested interest in destroying the rose," Roland said, again looking a bit bored.

"All this over a simple flower?" Cortana asked.

"You would be surprised what can be considered important when it comes to the lynchpin," Roland replied and then rotated his fingers again. "Is that all you saw?"

"Yeah, well that's all me and Jake saw. The Chief left before we went back into Tower's office." Roland eyed the Master Chief but the Spartan didn't seem to be paying much attention.

"So if this rose is important how do you plan to keep the Sombra Corporation from getting to it?" Cortana asked. At this point she wasn't sure if she was more concerned about getting home or about seeing the rose and The Dark Tower herself. If it was the later she doubted that John would like it.

"We buy it," Susannah said simply, "I have about \$10 million in the bank back in 1964. The accountant that handles it, Moses Carver; he's a good man, my god father in fact. All we'd have to do is find a doorway back into my time, get the money, and then travel to 1977 before the date runs out on Tower's agreement and buy the property from him. Then the Sombra Corporation won't be able to touch it."

Eddie hugged Susannah tighter with his right arm and kissed her on the head, "Didn't know I was married to a sugar momma."

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me sug," Susannah replied.

_If only you knew how true that was, _Cortana thought.

Roland was shaking his head, "You still don't realize how rare doorways to other worlds are, and now you are talking about finding two that point to specific when's and where's, which will be even rarer still."

"Well when you put it that way Roland our plan does sound a bit silly," Eddie said.

"It is,"

"It's about time you decided to come and talk to us," it was John who spoke and at first Cortana thought he was speaking to someone in the group. He was not facing them though, he was looking outward, at a man with a priest's collar, and for one horrible moment Cortana thought he was the man in black.

â€|

His face was too kind though to be the dark man. It was heavily wrinkled, his hair had gone completely grey, there was a scar in the shape of a cross on his forehead, and his features seemed to hint at an underlining sadness just beneath the rough leathery skin. The man regarded the Master Chief for a few moments, but did not seem too surprised to see a seven foot tall armor giant if not a little intimidated. Given that this man and his group had been following them for over a day and a half, he had plenty of time to get over the shock of seeing a Spartan in full armor. He then turned to Roland and got on one knee and put a closed fist on his forehead in a type of salute.

"Hile gunslinger,"

"Hile stranger, what be your name?"

"My name is Donald Callahan of the Calla, but before that I was Callahan of Detroit 1983, "

"Good God you're from our side," said Eddie.

"Yes gunslinger," he answered but his eyes never left Roland, "Are you of the Line of Arthur Eld?"

"Aye," Roland replied. Callahan's eyes gazed over the rest of the group and again lingered on the Spartan.

"And the rest of you are from my side?"

"Yes," Eddie said.

"When are you from?" and Susannah, Jake, and Eddie answered in turn.

>"1964"<p>

"1977"

"1987"

Callahan's eyes gleamed, "It's been long since I've regarded people from my world, so long that the ways of the Calla have become my

own." He looked at Cortana this time and asked, "What about you sai? What time have you come from, as judging by your machine friend it must be a long time after 1987, unless they had robots back then of course, but I doubt it." The Master Chief said nothing to this, he was used to be called little more than a machine, a weapon to be pointed and aimed. Cortana, however, was a different matter.

"Don't ever call my Spartan a machine again, and make sure you tell your friends who are with you not to do the same either," she said angrily and briefly felt the hard friction of equations and symbols running underneath her skin, although thankfully they did not surface. John raised his right hand in a calm down gesture; fingers spread and palm facing outwards. Callahan did much the same but with both hands.

"Forgive me sai,"

"It's ok, just don't do it again," she breathed heavily and attempted to get a hold of her emotions. "We are from the year 2557." Callahan's eyes grew wide at this.

"2557? You have come a long way to mid-world and the Calla's."

"I would say that from our perspective it's you who have come a long way Mr. 1983," Cortana said coolly.

"What is your middle name?" Jake asked, he was still holding the now burnt out stick in his hand.

"My full name is Donald Frank Callahan," Jake mumbled the name just as he had the others and wrote in the dirt on the ground as he had before. "What does it signify?" Callahan asked.

"They don't know yet, but if you ask me whatever it is they seemed a little obsessed over it," Cortana said.

"You don't know the half of it hon," added Susannah.

"Have you come to ask for aid and succor?" Asked the gunslinger, almost apprehensively.

"Indeed I have gunslinger; there are men, if they can be considered men. Wolves we Calla folks call them. They come every 23 to 25 years and take the children of the Calla for God knows what purpose. There are some that are not convinced that we could stop them, but with you here and your hard calibers, maybe you could convinceâ€|"

"We are not here to convince anyone Callahan of the Calla, you either request our aid or you do not," Roland said, his glare had turned to ice.

"Aye gunslinger I have read in the Tales of Arthur Eld on how this is done butâ€|" his voice grew to a low whisper, "I heard part of your palaver, and I have something that you might want. It is underneath the floor boards of my church. I believe it has reached out to you once last nightâ€|"

"You will not offer us anything for aiding you," the gunslinger said, his voice turning into a dull anger, "I do not deal in taking things from people who request the aid of gunslingers, I deal in lead. If

what you speak of is Maerlyn's Rainbow, and if you speak of Black Thirteen specifically, the most dangerous of them all then you bring shame upon our ka-tet. If the Calla call upon us to render aid then I am bound by the Laws of Gilead to do so, but I will not take this thing from your hands."

(Hypocrite) the voices yelled, (He has seen them before, he has used them before, that is how he knows they are so dangerous) She became so focused on the internal battle raging within herself that she did not notice John walk up to Callahan and place an armored hand on his shoulder. The priest shook a little at the sudden weight and looked up at him.

"Can this Black Thirteen take you anywhere you wanted to go?" he asked.

"Aye Spartan I believe it can, although I have been too afraid to use it myself," Callahan replied. John nodded.

"Then I would use it." Everything in Cortana's mind halted at this and she looked up at him.

"Men do not use Black Thirteen, Black Thirteen uses men," the gunslinger said and he stood up for this, his hand drifted to the sandalwood grips on his revolver. John similarly reached for his pistol.

"Let's get this straight between you and me. I don't care about your rose, your Dark Tower, or your ka-tet. All I care about is getting me and Cortana back home."

"Then you have forgotten the face of your father," Roland's hand inched closer to the revolver.

"I never had a father. Callahan, tell your people that if they need help I will give it." John eyed the gunslinger one last time, twin eyes meeting despite his golden visor, and then turned and left. Roland made to go after him but Cortana jumped up and put her hand on his chest to stop him.

"I'll talk to him, you don't go anywhere near him," she said not looking at his eyes.

"He is dangerous,"

Cortana finally met his eyes, and once again Roland thought he saw them flash red, "So are you,"

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John was facing away from her 100 meters from where the rest of the group was. Callahan had already left to retrieve the other representatives from the Calla. She walked around her Spartan and turned to face him, "What the hell was that John? You and Roland nearly tried to shoot each other."

"I should have," Cortana opened her mouth slightly at this in partial shock.

"You don't mean that John." The Spartan shrugged his shoulders.

"I was trained to neutralize threats, and he is beginning to show himself as one,"

"And what about you John? Roland said this Black Thirteen is dangerous. I don't like him anymore than you but he knows far more about this world than either of us. We can't just go using artifacts that we have no ability to understand."

"I can handle it, I've gone through worse."

"I don't want you to have to go through anything," Cortana said, nearly shouting at this point. She had her feet spread apart and her hands were clenched at her sides. "I don't want you to have to suffer for me anymore."

"It's my job to do that,"

"And my job is to keep you safe," Cortana said and she started shaking her head, tears beginning to flow in hot rivers from her eyes. "This isn't the man I know, not the man I chose, not the man Iâ€¦" she took a long shallow breath and Cortana continued to fight back the tears. Then John did something he had never done before, not even with his other Spartan's. He reached out and brushed the dark hair away from her face and cupped her cheek in his armored hand. The voices stopped at his touch all together, not even whispers echoed in her mind.

"The man I am wasn't enough to save you," he said quietly. Cortana looked up at him with her electric blue eyes.

"I don't care John. You are a good man and I don't want that to change. You and I are together now and that's all that matters." She reached her hand up and squeezed his. "Promise me you won't change."

"I promise."

9. Chapter 9

Chapter 9: An-tet

The sound of rubber wheels breaking and crackling the dry leaves on the ground of the forest signaled the coming of Susannah in her wheelchair. John let his hand drop from Cortana's face and although she understood why she could not say that she didn't miss the touch. Partially because once he did the low whispers began again in her head, but mostly becauseâ€¦well she didn't want to go into that part of her just yet. She wasn't ready, and she doubted that John was either. He may never be ready.

Susannah herself had not seen the brief display of affection for the dense underbrush of the forest, mostly grape vines, but also thorn bushes, small shrubs, and a plant that looked similar to poison ivy was blocking her view of the two. When she finally saw them they were standing apart, although appearance of hastily wiped away tear tracks on Cortana's face gave away much of what had happened. Susannah spoke to John, "Hun mind if me and Cortana have a bit of a chat?" It was a question, but her tone indicated differently.

John looked at Cortana who nodded and said, "It's alright Chief, we can talk," he nodded back and walked silently away leaving the two alone. Although Cortana knew that Susannah was more than likely mentally unstable she also knew that those who suffered from split-personality disorders, for that was the conclusion she had reached on Susannah's condition after she had seen her wander off last night with Roland hot on her heels; or rather lack of heels, gave off obvious signs when their personalities were about to shift. She had thought briefly about telling Susannah about her condition but decided against it. _We hardly know each other, how is it going to look if I just come up and say, "Hey you have another personality inside you that you're not aware of and she takes over while you're sleeping and goes out to feed on forest critters. Why you ask? Because that other personality thinks she's pregnant and is eating for two. Oh and by the way Roland has known this whole time." Somehow I don't think that's going to go over well. _

"You okay sugar? You seem like you are a million worlds away," asked Susannah and Cortana shook her mind back into focus.

"I'm fine."

Susannah turned her head back to where John had left and then to Cortana, "You two had a fight didn't you?"

Cortana blushed slightly in embarrassment and looked at the ground between her feet, "That obvious huh?"

"I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but those dried up tears on your face where enough of a clue."

"I wouldn't really call it a fight, more like me yelling and crying and him just standing there," Cortana looked at her and managed a small smile. Susannah smiled back. Her dark brown eyes and gentle features had a level of empathy in them that made Cortana think that she might have initially misjudged her.

"I think that is usually how fights go between men and women," Susannah said.

"I guess so."

"You know Roland says he believes you two are An-tet."

"More Gileadese?" Cortana said and laughed a little. Susannah laughed with her.

"The language is called the High Speech of Gilead. Roland has tried to teach us the language but other than a few words and phrases Eddie, Jake, and I haven't gotten the handle of it."

"So what does An-tet mean?"

Susannah gave Cortana a knowing gesture, a look that said _I think you know what I mean_. "Intimate,"

Cortana nearly choked at the mention of this word. "What?"

"By the way your blushing I take it that you are."

"Well no, I mean me and him, it's justâ€¦" her voice trailed away and she felt like she had back when she first arrived at the way station.

Susannah was still giving her the knowing smile, "You know we have all seen it not just Roland. The way you were able to get him to put down that light rifle thing back when we first met, the way he acted when Roland grabbed you yesterday, the way you look at him."

"He's my guardian. Sometimes he takes his job a little too seriously."

"Still doesn't explain the way you look at him."

Cortana did not have an answer to this. She paused for a long moment thinking, her eyes not really looking at anything, and Susannah's smile faded during this time. "You know even if I did want that, he wouldn't be able to. Roland's told you about the Spartans right?"

"Yes. The way he put it the Spartans were a bit like the gunslingers of your world."

"I suppose that's the best way he would be able to understand it, but don't tell the Chief he said that." Cortana's eyes focused back on the dark skinned woman in the wheelchair. "There was a woman in my world; her name was Doctor Catherine Elizabeth Halsey. She kidnapped the Master Chief at the age of six. She did things to him, experimented, made him into a weapon. He went through a series of augmentations at the age of fourteen that made him stronger and faster than any normal human. Part of those augmentations was to severely limit his sexual drive."

Susannah's mouth hung slightly open, "Where there other children?"

"Yes there were originally seventy-five, but only thirty-three successfully received the augmentations. The othersâ€¦" she allowed the sentence to trail off letting Susannah guess the rest.

"Monster."

"She is my mother," Cortana said quietly. The statement was partially true. Dr. Halsey had created her from her own brain and was therefore the closest thing she had to a mother.

"How," Susannah took a moment to run her hands through her long dark hair, "How can you live with a mother who could do something like that?"

"Let's just say that we haven't spoken in a number of years."

Susannah took a breath and composed herself, "You know back in 1964 I was part of the Civil Rights movement, at least which is what Eddie told me it was eventually called. Me and some other workers were arrested one night. They threw us in a jail cell, and at first were at least a little hospitable towards us, gave us plenty of water to

drink and let me tell ya we were thirsty at the time. Of course there were no toilets in the cells in those days, at least not the colored cells. The guards refused to let us go to the go to the bathroom, said it was too much of a risk, but we knew what they were really doing. They wanted to make us break. We all held our bladders for as long as we could but, well let's just say our biology eventually overcame our dignity. They let us go after that, didn't even charge us."

"I'm sorry," Cortana said and realized that she really had misjudged Susannah.

"All in the past dear. My point is that no matter what world you are in there will always be people who disregard basic human dignity."

"That's the terrible thing though; Halsey's work saved the human race from extinction. Because of what she did he has difficulty expressing even basic emotions. I can read him well enough but most people can't. Yet if it was not for the Spartans humanity would have lost the war."

"I guess it was all for the greater good then," Susannah said although her voice did not express agreement. She then surprised Cortana by smiling "You know An-tet does not just mean sexual intimacy, it can also mean a strong emotional connection or bond."

"Well guess when you stretch out the definition that much, me and the Chief are An-tet." It was hard not to smile when Susannah did.

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Jake was still sitting by the fire with the fully disassembled ruger pistol on a deer skin mat in front of him. He had the firing pin for the pistol in one hand, and was gently rubbing it with an oiled rag in the other. Cortana walked up and sat down next to him and smiled, but it faltered when he did not return it.

"You are too hard on Roland," he said and picked up another piece of the pistol, giving it the same loving care with the rag. "His family, all of his friends, everyone he ever cared about is dead, long dead. His entire civilization was destroyed. He's the last gunslinger, the last real one anyway. Me and the others do our best but we are not the same as his old ka-tet. Looking for The Dark Tower is the only thing keeping him going."

Cortana moved a little closer to Jake and pulled her knees up into her arms, "He's like a father to you isn't he?"

"Yes, the only real one I've ever had," he looked at her now and Cortana saw a face that was older than that of a twelve year old boy. "The Master Chief said he didn't have a father."

"He's a bit like you. He has a biological father but not a real one, not one he remembers or that was able to love him." Jake turned away and continued work on cleaning his pistol. "Jake is a nickname isn't it?"

"Yes, my real name is John Chambers, but I prefer to be called Jake." He was beginning to reassemble the pistol now, each part falling effortlessly into place. When he was finished he pulled the action back, let it ride forward and smiled at the click it made.

"You know the Master Chief's real name is John also."

Jake looked at her and his features went back to being that of a young child, "Really? Why are you telling me this?"

Cortana shrugged her shoulders, "Because I like you. You're a sweet kid. Just promise me you won't go telling everybody, he doesn't like other people knowing his real name."

"I promise, don't worry,"

"You always keep your promises don't you?"

"Yep," A large shadow loomed over them and Cortana looked up to see John.

"There're here. Let's get moving."

10. Chapter 10

Chapter 10: Andy the Messenger Robot

Including Callahan there were six representatives from the Calla that came down the hill to greet the gunslingers, John, and Cortana. There was Wayne David Overholser who was the biggest farmer of the Calla, Benjamin Slightman the elder and his son Benny Slightman the younger, and the man who had had called upon the people of the Calla to make a stand against the Wolves, Tian Jaffords who had brought his wife Zalia. She was a dark tanned woman who although still pretty had definitely seen the better days of her youth. Upon seeing the Spartan she left her husband's side and nearly ran to John, looking too grateful to be intimidated by the green giant of a man.

"Is it true what the Old Fella Callahan said? That you are to fight the Wolves?" she asked him, hands clasped in front of her face.

John's face never turned away from Zalia by Cortana felt his eyes drift towards her. She sighed and nodded her head. Of course John would fight, that was what he was best at. His training might have taught him that sometimes the best way to win a battle was to avoid one altogether, but after he saw the look of desperation in the woman's face Cortana knew he would not be able to refuse. He would never admit that things like this affected him, but they did all the same. Cortana was at least happy that he implicitly asked for her approval before he agreed.

"Yes, I'll fight," John said, and Zalia started crying at his words.

"Praise The Man Jesus. Thankee sai thankee." She then turned towards Roland who had been viewing the spectacle with the same mild look he always wore. "Are you from the Line of Arthur Eld?"

"I am the last of my line, but yes I hail from Gilead that was," at this Zalia's eyes grew wide, tears forgotten. She dropped to one knee, fist on her forehead much as Father Callahan had done. Her husband soon joined her.

"Hile gunslinger."

"Hile Tian and Zalia Jaffords of the Calla, we are well met along the path."

Tian and his wife rose from their knees, "Praise the gods there are still gunslingers left in mid-world," Tian said. At this Callahan crossed himself, as did Zalia. "Beg your pardon Old Fella."

"There is no need for forgiveness Tian you are not of my parish. You are free to worship whatever heathen gods you wish."

"I think Callahan should be more worried about them worshiping Roland," Cortana commented to Susannah who nodded.

"In a way they do. Gilead was once the cultural and political center of mid-world, the light in the midst of chaos. Once it fell anarchy was all that remained. Roland may look like one of those desperados from some T.V. western, but back before the world moved on gunslingers were very similar to the medieval knights. He is the last remnant of those days, that and his guns. Look at how they all stare at them, most of them probably have never seen a working gun before," Susannah said and Cortana did look. The men and woman of the Calla did indeed stare at the ruger pistol that Jake wore, and even longer at John's strange assortment of weapons, but the stared the longest and the hardest at Roland's blue steeled hard calibers.

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At midday they broke bread with the representatives of the Calla, all except for John who stood apart from the group as did Father Callahan who ate his meal alone, after blessing himself of course. Zalia Jaffords, who had made especially sure to tell them that much of the food was of her own recipe, seemed a bit crestfallen when the Spartan did not join them.

"It's alright Zalia, the Master Chief has never been that comfortable around other people," Cortana had said, making a mental note to have a conversation with John about being more sociable.

"But if he is a man underneath all that metal and not a machine as the Old Fella says then he must be a large one. Surely a man that size would have some sort of appetite."

"Trust me he does, but you have to give him time to warm up to you," Cortana said, although she knew that her statement probably was not true. John rarely warmed up to anybody.

After the meal the men of the Calla spoke of the Wolves, or rather Overholser had spoken. He was the largest landholder in the Calla and like the rich of any society held the most sway. He was also the largest voice against standing against the Wolves.

"They kill all those who stand up to them. We are farmers not soldiers. If ye fail to kill them they will surely burn the Calla to

the ground and take all the children with them this time," he had said. Roland said nothing to this and merely twirled his fingers for Overholser to continue.

The Wolves came across the river into the Calla every twenty-three to twenty-five years, and had been doing so for at least the last one hundred and twenty years, at least according to the Manni who had dedicated their lives to counting the days in a world where time meant little and were rumored to be able to travel between worlds. The Wolves as the Calla folk called them hailed from the land across the river. Thunderclap, a realm of perpetual darkness where the world had already ended and all that reigned was the great eye of The Crimson King.

(Reign Discordia) the voices had said at this.

They came for the children of the Calla, or more specifically the twins, who were the rule rather than the exception in this land. They would find the twins wherever they hid, would pursue the ones who ran into the forest for days if necessary, and would kill any who attempted to stop them. They were not true Wolves, but as Overholser explained it they were neither men nor machines. They rode grey horses that could move at unnatural speeds, wore emerald cloaks and hoods, and grey masks that stuck to their faces as a second skin. Most importantly though were their weapons. There were guns of course, of lower quality than the ones Roland and John wore, but effective nonetheless; the Wolves used what the Calla folk called light sticks that once again reminded Eddie of Star Wars, and tiny golden balls that had been nicknamed sneetches by the people of the Calla which were thrown like heat seeking grenades and protruded two laser sharp blades that cut through flesh with sickening proficiency. However, as recently as the last raid by the Wolves they had begun to deploy a new weapon, small blue balls that glowed as they were thrown and stuck to flesh. When the blue balls exploded they burned and melted anything within a four meter blast radius. John's eyebrow rose at this beneath his visor, as did Cortana's

They would only take one twin and leave the other. For what purpose they took the children no person in the Calla could say, but they knew where they took them, into Thunderclap. After several days the children that had been taken would be returned but in a state that the Calla folk called Roont, severely mentally handicapped Cortana had surmised. After four years they would grow to be well over six feet in height, but all that growth would occur in the span of several months. The sharp splintering pain that the Roont children endured during this time would cause many of them to scream in agony for days on end. After the growth had stopped many of them could be put to work doing simple and menial labor. Cortana had voiced her dissent at this.

"And what would you have us do with them sai Cortana? Much better that they be put to something useful than allowed to run free through the Calla," Overholser had said and the other representatives nodded their heads in agreement. Cortana thought for a moment. These were rural farm people. They did not have the infrastructure or the facilities to deal with the mentally handicapped, much less the proper concept of how to do so. From their perspective putting the children that the Wolves had taken to work may be the only solution they could come up with. Roonts themselves rarely survived past the age of thirty-five and their deaths were often just as painful as the

period of extreme growth.

â€|

It was during the meal that Cortana had found that she shared something else besides memories and physical similarities to her creator Dr. Halsey, the love of coffee. The bean itself was grown extensively throughout the Calla but she had discovered through Roland that in most of mid-world the brew was nearly worth its weight in gold. The beans themselves had been ground by hand, and she had found a few of them floating around in her cup. Yet it still was by far the best thing she tasted since arriving in mid-world. Unfortunately for Cortana, she also discovered after Overholser had finished his explanation of the Wolves one of the side effects of drinking too much of the sweetly bitter drink. John had attempted to escort her into the woods after she excused herself but she stopped him by making the number one with her right index finger held out in front of her chest. It had taken him a few second to realize what she meant but eventually, and much to Cortana's relief, John had nodded his head in confirmation and left her alone.

She was in the midst of relieving herself when a smooth synthetic male voice caused her to jump nearly a foot in the air and Cortana quickly pulled up her faded blue jeans to cover herself.

"Did you enjoy the meal sai Cortana?" The voice belonged to Andy the Messenger Robot (Many Other Functions). According to Benjamin Slightman he was the last working robot in the Calla, a remnant from the days of The Old People. To Cortana he reminded her of 343 Guilty Spark. His eyes were a cold blue, body made of faded gold metal, and he was the same height as the Master Chief. Seven feet give or take an inch. His movements were far less smooth than the Spartan though, metallic and clunky, yet he had an almost disturbing ability to move through the underbrush with little to no noise. He had helped Zalia Jaffords with lunch, cooking the steaks over the fire to an almost perfect medium rare, but had remained silent as the men of Calla spoke of the Wolves. It was Andy that warned the people of the Calla exactly when the Wolves would arrive, although how he knew was anybody's guess. He had also told the Old Fella Callahan about the arrival of the gunslingers, and later about the arrival of the Master Chief and Cortana.

"Andy, didn't your programmer teach you not to sneak up on people?"

"Sneak up, phrase meaning to conceal oneself from another in order to surprise, usually for nefarious purposes. I did not sneak up on you sai Cortana, you just did not hear me," Andy said with a note of smugness that Cortana was sure whoever created him would not have programmed him with.

"Well I suppose a dumb AI such as you would not know the finer points of proper etiquette."

"Dumb AI, unknown terminology. Most likely meaningâ€|"

Cortana cut him off with a wave of her hand, "Never mind, just get out of my way I need to be heading back."

Andy stepped sideways allowing Cortana to pass but she stopped dead

when he said, "You are like me sai Cortana."

Cortana turned back around and looked at him, "What did you just say?"

"External scans show your makeup to be mostly biological, but your brain activity is far higher than that of a normal human. Conclusion: you are originally synthetic in nature," Andy said in a monotone sense of voice that held the same air of smugness.

"Well I'm sorry to burst your bubble but I'm notâ€|"

"Voice analysis indicates lie. You are synthetic sai Cortana."

_Crap, _Cortana thought. "Fine I was an AI. So now that you know something about me why don't you give me a little Intel. What do you know about The Fall of Gilead?"

"Fall of Gilead: occurred as the result of a major rebellion against the Inner Baronies led by John Farsonâ€|" _what is with all the Johns in this world? _Cortana had thought at this, "who promised his followers freedom from the nobility and democracy. John Farson did not deliver on these promises and was assassinated in the years shortly following the deaths of the last gunslingers at The Battle of Jericho Hill. Current estimates put The Fall of Gilead nearly a thousand years ago."

"That's not possible. Roland is from Gilead, he was at The Battle of Jericho Hill."

"Correct sai Cortana. Voice analysis has determined that sai Roland is not lying about being of Gilead."

"So you're malfunctioning then? Great."

"Negative. I go through routine automated maintenance checks and have not experienced a malfunction in nearlyâ€|"

Cortana waved her hand at him again, "Whatever. Tell me what you know about the Wolves. How do you always know that they are coming?"

At this Andy seemed to lock up, his heels clicking together and arms falling to the side in a sort of rigid attention, "User has attempted to access information pertaining to directive nineteen. Password required. User has ten seconds to give the correct password or all information will be perminatly locked."

Cortana raised an eyebrow and brought her hand up to scratch the back of her neck, "I don't suppose the password is "password" is it?"

"Negative. User has five seconds leftâ€|"

"Cancel data inquiry," she said and Andy snapped out of his lockdown.

"Data inquiry canceled. Would you like to attempt again sai Cortana?"

"Not right now, although I could always just hack you in order to get to the information you know about the Wolves."

"Highly unlikely. While your neural processes indicate that you are a more advance model than I, you have become far too biological to attempt the sophisticated methods required to circumvent the firewalls surrounding directive nineteen."

"Hmm, well we'll just have to see about that wont we?"

â€|

When both Cortana and Andy had returned from the woods she went and stood next to John, who while not acknowledging her presences did shift his stance slightly towards her. Andy for his part did not divulge Cortana's secret, much to her relief, although it was unlikely that the men of the Calla would have paid much attention. They were arguing, and she quickly guessed what it was about.

"We must stand against the Wolves," Tian Jaffords said, his wife nodding in agreement, "There are gunslingers here now who will help us, and the Spartan has agreed to fight as well. Every generation the Wolves come they sap more of our strength, make us grow weaker do ya kennit? Tap us out right at the root."

"I agree with you Tian," said Benjamin Slightman the elder, rubbing his glasses with the coarse cotton of his shirt, "but if we fail, if they fail to kill the Wolves then all of the Calla will surely parish." Both Roland and John's fingers twitch slightly at this statement and Cortana heard Callahan mutter the word "Coward" under his breath.

"How much time do we have?" John asked.

"Andy says about twenty-six days," Benjamin Slightman said.

"Beg yur pardon Spartan but you are only one man, if you are indeed a man as the Old Fella says. You cannot hope to stand up to eighty wolves by yourself," Overholser said.

"I have fought against worse odds."

"Even if you have, you have not fought against Wolves, and even if they are gunslingersâ€|"

"You doubt that I am of the Line of Eld?" Roland said. His voice was not angry but his eyes held a dangerous glint.

Overholser moved his hand halfway up to his mouth, as if to wipe the words from his mouth, but it dropped uselessly to his side, "Cry yur pardon gunslâ€|" he began but was cut off.

"No need to cry pardon sai Overholser. You wish to see credentials and you shall have them."

"That will not beâ€|"

"Yes it will. Jake, come here son." Jake, who had been playing with Oy and Benny Slightman the younger and looking very much the child that he was, came over to Roland. When he arrived Roland had picked

up four plates and began to examine them closely, as a jeweler would examine a diamond. "Who are you?" Cortana saw Jake's eyes glaze over just as they had when his body lay broken on the streets of New York, and much like he had looked earlier that morning when he and Cortana had discussed Roland, he became a young man of indeterminate age.

"I am John Chambers," Cortana felt a sharp electric spike run up her back.

"And what are you?" Roland asked.

"I am a gunslinger." Jake's hand drifted to the ruger pistol at his side.

"Recite your lessons gunslinger," and Jake recited.

"I do not aim with my hand. He who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I aim with my eye."

"I do not shoot with my hand. He who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I shoot with my mind."

I do not kill with my gun. He who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father. I kill with my heart."

With no warning Roland threw the plates into the air and they quickly found a one meter spread from each other. The phenomenon of "Spartan Time" was well documented within the UNSC, especially ONI. Massive amounts adrenaline would flood the brain during key moments in combat, slowing the perception of time down to a near crawl for the individual Spartan. Jake had just entered the gunslinger's version of Spartan time. The four shots blended together into one continuous roar, and the plates shattered as the bullets impacted them. No one but Roland, John, and Jake were able to tell which plate had been struck first. The representatives of the Calla were in shock, their mouths hanging agape. Jake immediately returned to the boy of twelve that he was and raised his left fist in the air, smiling widely.

The voices in Cortana's head reached a cacophony and this time she did not have to ask them what they meant. They were yelling about Roland, and Dr. Halsey.

11. Chapter 11

Chapter 11: The Lynchpin of All Existence

They were to sleep at their own camp tonight, and tomorrow would be taken on horseback to the Calla. Cortana walked beside John as they descended the long sloping hill, following the faint smell of burning brush back to the remnants of their own fire. As they walked she thought about the events that transpired directly after Jake had shot the plates.

The people of the Calla, with the exception of Callahan, had put their hands up to their ears in an effort to drown out the noise of Jake's pistol. They were afraid. _No not just afraid,_ Cortana had thought, _they're terrified, absolutely terrified_. Roland gave Jake an approving pat on the shoulder, and the way the boy beamed at his adoptive father's sign of affection showed that this form of

acknowledgement was very rare indeed. Overholser had lost all of his color, his skin as sickeningly pale as John's. Roland turned to him and he lost more color still.

"Do you still doubt that I am a descendent of Arthur Eld?" Roland asked.

"No," was all that Overholser managed to say. He cleared his throat a little; some of the color returning to his cheeks, and spoke again. "We must still bring the issue before the town. Once the people of the Calla have reached their decision we will let you know gunslinger."

"Democracy," Roland sighed in contempt. "Very well, I and my ka-tet will spend that time studying the Calla, determining if it can be defended at all."

"And what if it can't?" Zalia Jaffords ask, hope fading from her voice.

"There is always a way," John said at this. "I'll stay, even if they don't."

Zalia bowed her head slightly, "Thankee sai."

"He is right though, there is always a way," said Roland and the two men eyed each other.

Now as they reached the bottom of the hill Cortana looked at Jake. He had sat down on a log by the smoldering fire and seemed to be attempting to teach Oy to rollover. He twirled his fingers in a circle but the billybumbler just followed them with his head, making a circle of his own. Jake sighed and gave Oy the signal to sit, which he obeyed. He then signaled the billybumbler to lie down, which he did, and Jake once again made a twirling motion with his fingers. Instead of performing the trick Oy reached out with his long tongue and licked the boy's fingers. Jake laughed in spite of himself and then was nearly knocked over when Oy jumped up and put both paws on Jake's chest.

"Just a boy," Cortana muttered to no one in particular but John still heard her.

"No older than I was," he said.

"That doesn't make it right John."

The Master Chief shrugged his shoulders at this. To anyone else it would have been a gesture of indifference, but Cortana knew him better than that, "He reminds me of myself."

Cortana smiled gently at him, still watching Jake play by the fire, "He is like you in more ways than you know," she said. Her smile faded, "John I know more about your past than you do, I know who your parents were, when and where you were born, I even know your last name" she glanced up at her Spartan who was also looking at her, "If you wanted to know about your parents, about who you really are, all you have to do is ask." She wanted him to ask her more than anything.

Instead he said, "No, I don't need to know."

"I had a feeling you were going to say that." She wanted to touch him, let him know it was alright. He wouldn't want that though, not in front of everybody. Instead she turned her attention back towards Jake who had grabbed a stick and added the name Wayne Dale Overholser on the ground next to the other names and numbers, "Johnâ€¦" she started but stopped the sentence short when she saw Roland moving towards them. The Master Chief took a few strides forward meeting the gunslinger halfway, and Cortana followed behind him.

"Spartan, I request a palaver," Roland said, and Cortana did not miss that he failed to look at her.

"Why?" John asked.

The gunslinger took a moment to light a cigarette. He let out a long trail of smoke from his mouth before answering, "Black Thirteen. If the priest Callahan does indeed possess it then it is likely the cause of you going todash with Jake and Eddie last night. It may yet happen again tonight."

"I'll be on watch. I don't plan on sleeping," John said.

"I doubt that will make a difference. As I said before, Black Thirteen uses men."

And indeed John would sleep that night, and he would go todash again along with the others. The sleep that had been thrust upon him was not nearly as forceful as the sleep thrust upon Cortana the night before, but it was certainly close. There was no fighting it, and the last thing the Spartan heard before losing consciousness was once again the sound of the bells. He was not the first to dream that night though, that right belonged to Cortana. She dreamed of the man in black.

â€¦

_ Six men huddled around a holotank which illuminated their faces in a ghostly glow. It was almost the only source of light in the room, and Cortana could just make out that the men were wearing military uniforms, but they were not UNSC. _Insurrectionists_, she thought. The holotank was showing a base hidden deep within the surface of a large asteroid. Weapons emplacements were highlighted, what few there were, and the three MAC guns that the Insurrectionists had probably stolen from some derelict UNSC ship were highlighted in red. Even after only glancing at the holotank Cortana knew that the defenses would only manage to offer token resistance to any serious attack._

_ "UNSC forces are pulling out of the system and we have confirmed reports of Covenant stealth ships scouting the entrance of the base," a man with a colonel's insignia said. "How many civilians do we have?"_

_ A major responded "Sir, there are an estimated 15,000 civilians currently taking refuge within the complex. We have 3,000 soldiers currently fit for duty, but there is only enough ammunition for 100 rounds per man. That's not counting ammunition for rocket launchers, heavy machine guns, grenades, Sniper rounds, the list goes on sir. We

are short on everything." _

_ The colonel nodded, "Are we still in contact with ONI?" _

_ "Yes sir," another one of his aids responded, "They have promised to evacuate the civilians on the condition that we surrender unconditionally, but we have only a twenty hour window in which to reply." _

_ "Very well, tell themâ€¦" the colonel was interrupted by a light chuckle coming from one of the dark corners. The men turned as did Cortana. The man stepped out of the darkness, he was dressed in black leather boots which clicked the ground when he walked, blue jeans, and a denim jacket that had two buttons on it. One was a peace symbol and the other was a great crimson red eye." _

_ "Thomas," the dark man said, "You give up too easily." _

_ "Flagg, what are you doing here?" the colonel asked, his voice breaking. The other officers took instinctive half steps back from the dark man. _

_ "I am everywhere, have you not learned that by now old friend?" and then although no one could see his shadow covered eyes, everyone in the room could feel them as he looked around, including Cortana. "Now, we will not surrender. We will fight as we always have, and endure as we always have. And if the Covenant come? Then so be it." A few of the officers nodded in agreement, although Cortana suspected this was done mostly out of fear. The colonel, Thomas, was the only one to voice dissent. _

_ "You are insane Flagg, we have no means to defend ourselves. If the Covenant comesâ€¦" he stopped dead as the dark man looked at him. The man in black lifted his hood slightly, and although Cortana could still not see his eyes, she knew that the colonel could. He could see them very well._

_ "I would be careful about who you call insane Thomas," he said. The colonel stared at the dark man for a few moments, stared into his eyes. Then he began to laugh. It was a strangled, painful laugh, the kind of laugh that sounds very much like a scream, and may very well be close to that. The colonel's face began to turn purple as he fought for air, but the laughter left little room for breaths. He fell to his knees, and then onto his back, clutching at his throat. "Guards take the good colonel away. I am afraid that he is unfit for duty." The dark man waited as two guards came in, dragging the colonel's body out of the command center. His leg twitched a few times before becoming as still as the rest of his body. "Now is there anyone else who wishes to voice their dissent?" When no one answered he said "Good, very good." _

_ The scene dissolved and was replaced with one of destruction. The insurrectionist complex was filled with Covenant. A few reports of gunfire and plasma rifles sounded off in the far distance, but in the corridor that Cortana found herself in now there were only bodies, mostly children. They lay on the ground, hands clutching at one another. There were a few shell casings lying on the floor, and Cortana recognized the body of one of the officers that was in the command center clutching a pistol. She heard the clicking of boot heels to her left and turned. The dark man, who was now in the same

robe that he had worn back at the way station, walked in between a group of grunts. The unggoy did not see the dark man, but felt his presence all the same. They huddled closer to one another and clutched their plasma pistols tighter. The man in black walked over to the officer with the pistol and made a tisking sound as he turned the dead man's face over with his boot. He then bent down and picked up an object, a plasma grenade. The dark man studied the device for a few moments. _

_ "Now this, this will be useful," he said, and the scene faded.

_

â€|

_ Cortana was blinded; two beams of bright lights were bearing down on her. Her eyes focused just enough to see that they were the headlights of a delivery truck, and on the side there were the words BIG AL'S FURNITURE EMPORIUM. A hand grabbed her shoulder and pulled her out of the street and onto the sidewalk just as the vehicle came screaming past. _

_ "Are you ok?"It was John. _

_ "Yeah, I'm fine," Cortana said as she rubbed her shoulder. She was back in New York, 1977. It was night, and a police siren sounded in the distance. She looked at John and saw he was wearing standard issue UNSC PT gear. _

_ "You know it's pretty bad when you are in proper uniform even when you're dreaming," she said chuckling. It was good to see him out of his armor, even if he did need a tan. _

_ The corner of John's lips twitched into a smile, "Enjoying yourself?"_

_ "At your expense? Of course I am," she looked around, nose twitching slightly at the heavy scent of gasoline and exhaust coming from the numerous cars on the street. _Its dark, _she thought, even though it was silly thing to think. It was night, it was supposed to be dark. Yet there was something fundamentally different with this darkness. "John, do you see how dark it is?"_

_ "Its night," he said, the smile he had faded, "Are you sure you are ok?"_

_ "I'm fine, and I know its night. There is something different about this darkness though. I can't quite see it but I can _(the world has moved on) _sense it," she stopped. She had heard the voice again, not the voices of rampancy that had been plaguing her again for the past few days, and were thankfully silent in this dream. It was the voice that she had heard when she had dreamed of The Dark Tower. She looked at John whose eyes were busy scanning the sidewalk, street, and buildings. "Did you hear that?"_

_ "Yes, I've heard it before, when me Jake and Eddie went todash last night."_

_ "What is it?" _

_ "I don't know," and with that he stepped back a few feet. Cortana

raised her eyebrows at him for a second in confusion before she was nearly tackled by a tall dark haired woman. _

_ "I have my legs back!" Susannah shouted crushing Cortana in a bear hug. Susannah released her and lifted each of her new legs up to show off "Praise the Man Jesus and all the gods there are, I have legs." She then turned towards the Master Chief and hugged him around his waist. He lifted both hands up as the woman hugged him, and gave Cortana a strange look. It took her a while to understand what that look meant, mostly because she had never seen it before. John was panicking. _

_ Cortana smirked at him, "Well that's what you get for letting her blindside me." _

_ Susannah laughed at Cortana's statement and loosened her grip on the Spartan. She stopped laughing when she looked up into John's eyes. "Chief, your eyes. They're the same as Roland's." _

_ "I've noticed. Where are the others?" _

_ Susannah turned to Cortana, "Is he always like this?" _

_ "Usually." _

â€|

_ They met Roland, Jake, and Eddie at the entrance to the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. The others had noticed the unnatural darkness as well and Roland eyed the Spartan when he said that he did not see it. _

_ "So Jake, I hear you have something to show us," Cortana said and Jake smiled back at her. _

_ "Yeah the rose. You need to see it, especially the Chief, he needs to see it the most I think." John said nothing and just folded his arms. They walked for two blocks before reaching the vacant lot. The lot itself was surrounded by an eight foot high wooden fence that blocked the view from street level. When they arrived Susannah seemed to hesitate. She let go of Eddie's hand and Cortana noticed her briefly rubbing her midsection. _

_ "Honey you go ahead, I think I'm just going to stay here," she said to Eddie. _

_ "Are you sure Suze?" he asked, but seemed distracted. He did not notice the move that Susannah had made towards her stomach and instead was staring at the fence that surrounded the vacant lot. There seemed to be singing coming from inside the lot. It wasn't audible, but Cortana could almost feel the chorus vibrating inside her own body. _

_ "Yeah sug, I'm not feeling too well," and again she touched her stomach, "Go ahead, I'll be just fine out here." _

_ At this Eddie looked at her, and for a moment was unsure. That look did not last, however, and he quickly turned his attention back to the lot where the singing was coming from. He nodded his head and said, "Okay if you're sure." He then bent down and cupped his hands

together. "Alright Jake you first." The boy put his foot in Eddie's hands and was boosted up and over the fence. He then stepped away as Roland bent down to give Eddie a boost. _

_ Cortana looked at John, "Think you could give me a boost too Chief." The Master Chief nodded and then bent down much like Eddie had, cupping his hands together. Cortana was unprepared for the force with which the Spartan lifted her and was nearly catapulted up and over the fence. She landed a little less gracefully than she intended to inside the vacant lot and heard the sharp crackling of breaking glass beneath her boots. A moment later Eddie landed beside her. Roland and John followed, pulling themselves over the fence with one hand, each landing as smoothly as the other. _

_ Cortana looked at the small vacant lot. There was trash, broken beer bottles, and weeds poking up through crushed slabs of concrete. There was a pink bowling bag in the middle of the lot and on it were the words NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MIDWORLD LANES. Jake bent down briefly to pick the bowling bag up, but she hardly noticed. What she did notice, what she saw very clearly, was the rose. _

_ It stood upon a green vine that lacked any thorns, perhaps a foot above the ground. There were nineteen perfectly formed, symmetrical, blood red petals surrounding the core of the flower. They walked in silence towards it, and as they approached the rose the petals opened up revealing a soft yellow that emanated from what appeared to be a small sun. The singing had grown louder; all of them could hear it now. It was without words. It was the song of the rose, of the Tower, and of the White. Of everything that was good in this world and in others. Without realizing it Cortana's hand had found John's and he held hers gently._

_ She felt her consciousness leave her body and she was floating upwards. She saw herself, John, Eddie, Jake, and Roland bending down to look at the rose. She saw New York with its lights twinkling in and out like fireflies in the summer night's air. There was the Earth, blue, spinning on its broken axis. Her consciousness lifted her further upwards and she saw the Halos, the Ark not yet destroyed by the battle that would take place there over 500 years later, and Requiem still lying dormant with the Didact imprisoned inside. Still the invisible hand kept dragging her upwards and she saw the entire galaxy, and then others, more than she could possibly count. The galaxies themselves became atoms, electrons buzzing around their centers. Still the hand pulled her and she saw the atoms coalesce together until finally they formed a single petal. A petal of the rose. _

_ "John, did you see that?" she said, letting his name slip out. None of the others noticed however. They were too transfixed. _

_ "Yes, I saw it," he said and she gripped his hand tighter. _

_ It was clear to her now, in this one instant. She saw in her mind's eye all the infinite worlds and realities spinning together along one axis, revolving around the dark pylon. The Dark Tower, the lynchpin that held everything that was, is, and had yet to be together. There was something wrong though, she felt it and knew that the others did as well, including John. The foundations of the Tower were crumbling, a sickening cancer eating away at its core. She did not yet know what was wrong with it, but she did know that while the Tower was weak

this small fragile rose was the only thing holding all of existence together, and the Sombra Corporation, these so called agents of The Crimson King who command legions of beings far worse than men, Forerunner, Flood, or Covenant, sought to destroy it. _

_ "We must protect it," Roland said his voice barely above a whisper; "While the Tower is weak we must protect it."_

_ "Agreed," said John, the words coming before he even realized they left his lips._

_ "How do we protect it?" Eddie asked, the soft light of the rose's sun shining on his face, bouncing off of his eyes. _

_ "We buy the lot from Calvin Tower, just like Susannah said," Jake replied, his left hand still holding onto the pink bowling bag. "I'm not sure exactly why but I think that they can't harm the rose unless they own the piece of ground it grows in."_

_ "Then that is what we'll do," Roland said and looked at John and Cortana, "That is what we all must do."_

_ The chimes began and the darkness that had surrounded her since the dream began seemed to grow more palpable. It encroached on her and she saw that Roland, Eddie, and Jake had already disappeared. Cortana reached out and grabbed onto the Master Chief's arm, pulling herself closer to him. "John," she said, fearful._

_ "It's okay, I know what's coming. Stay close to me." She stayed close to him, even as the darkness enveloped them both, even as she saw the creatures in the darkness, those primordial beings of chaos, and she saw that they were afraid of him, of John. _

12. Chapter 12

Chapter 12: The Calla

Horses had fallen out of use at the turn of the 20th century and had become a rare sight on Earth after the Rain Forest Wars destroyed much of the planet's ecosystem. Yet through the determined efforts of a number of conservation groups horses had been saved from extinction, and had even been put to use again on some of the more sparsely populated and cut off outer colonies. That was before the Human Covenant War though. With every single outer colony that had held a sizable population of horses glassed the animal had once again been driven to near extinction, and most biologists projected the species to die out completely within the next century and a half. Now Cortana was expected to ride one into the Calla.

"They're a bit bigger than I expected, not as tall as you but still," she said to John as the representatives of the Calla brought the horses up. There were five of them, not counting the ones that the Calla folk were riding. One for Cortana, Susannah, Eddie, Jake, and Roland, with John walking beside them with Andy. She could already tell that the Spartan did not like the prospect of having to walk beside the clunky metal robot.

"You do technically know how to ride it," John said, watching as Eddie lifted Susannah, who was now once again legless, into the

saddle of one of the horses. He was not sure if the others had experience with riding the animals, although Roland who was native to this world certainly had, but judging by the level of comfort they had around the horses he suspected that they probably had ridden them before.

"Researching how to ride a horse for three minutes and actually riding one are two different things John," she said, walking up to one of the beasts and attempting to climb up into the saddle. To her surprise she managed to do so without the Master Chief's help, although the horse seemed to neigh in disapproval of the new inexperienced rider.

"You'll do fine," he said and she could feel the smirk behind his visor.

Cortana nudged the heels of her boots into the side of the horse and it began to walk backwards, "Oh yeah because this counts as fine. I'm sure I could just ride the horse backwards into town."

John grabbed the reigns and stopped the horse effortlessly, "Try it again," he said.

She could still feel the smirk and shot daggers at him with her eyes. Once again she nudged the side of the horse with her boots and this time it began to trot forward. Cortana did her best to ignore the look of amusement coming from the Calla folk and Roland's ka-tet.

They rode for several hours, John walking beside her and easily matching the strides of the horse. The trees were gradually beginning to thin and Andy the Messenger Robot was sent ahead to do what he did best and tell the people of the Calla that they were coming. Then all at once the forest seemed to stop and the travelers had their first look at the wide, mostly flat, and fertile farming plane that held the Calla. The town itself was modest in size with only thirty or forty buildings at most. Stretching out from north to south along a wide slow moving river was farmland with more buildings scattered throughout it. To the east of the river there was only desert, although it looked far different than the one she and the Master Chief had landed in back at the way station. Beyond the desert there was only perpetual night. That was the land of Thunderclap, the land where twenty-five days from now up to eighty Wolves would come riding out to take the children of the Calla for their own nefarious purposes.

"I don't think I have ever seen anything like this Chief, not even on the Halos. How can terrain change so drastically from farmland to desert with only a river to separate them?" she asked, and it was Callahan who answered her.

"The land beyond the river is cursed, at least that is what the people of the Calla tell me, and say true I believe them. It is always dark in that land, even on the brightest of days," Callahan said. Cortana looked up and found the path of the beam once again, gently pushing clouds in a straight line over the town, and into Thunderclap. That was the land they would have to cross into in order to reach The Dark Tower, and as Cortana began to ride down with the others towards the town she wondered what kind of creatures would live in a realm such as that.

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The town itself seemed desolate, and Cortana was reminded of Eddie's story about arriving in empty versions of Topeka Kansas and the Land of Oz. There being an alternate version of Topeka seemed logical enough to her, considering she and John were currently residing in an alternate reality called mid-world, and that it appeared that certain things such as a film series entitled Star Wars existed in Eddie and Jake's versions of New York but did not exist at any point in hers and the Master Chief's reality. Yet the idea that an entire reality that was only supposed to exist within the realm of fiction could in fact be real defied all logical explanation. There was no lie in Eddie's voice when he told them about Oz, but she found it hard to believe all the same.

The horse's hooves made soft clounding sounds on the dirt road as they turned off of the main street. In front of them now was a large pavilion lined with torches, and in it were nearly eight hundred people waiting for them, all silent. John tensed as he saw the large crowd and his shoulders seemed to become even straighter than usual.

"You ok?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said and she shook her head at this. If these people were trying to kill them maybe then he would be fine, but having a crowd just standing there waiting for them, waiting for him? John had almost no idea how to handle a situation like that. The crowd parted as they walked past, giving the Spartan an extra wide berth. Cortana could smell the faint scent of food and had to stand up a little in the stirrups so that she could see over the crowd. There were several large platters of food, jugs filled with what she guessed was some sort of wine, and in front of them a raised platform and on it a band.

_ This isn't just a town meeting we've walked into; it's a party, for us. For the gunslingers, me, and John, _she thought and immediately felt even worse for her Spartan. A party was the last thing he needed. The horses were hitched in an area to the side of the raised stage and the crowd began to murmur as the gunslingers and Cortana climbed down from the saddles. Overholser walked in front of them, cleared his throat, and climbed the stairs leading to the stage. Roland and his ka-tet quickly followed, but John seemed to hesitate.

"I can always go up there alone and introduce the both of us Chief," Cortana said, although now she was beginning to feel butterflies as well. Certainly a new sensation and one she had not felt while her body consisted only of a hologram and any public speeches she made were confined to a strict military setting.

"I'm more worried about whether the stage will be able to hold my weight," the Master Chief replied and Cortana gave a small snort of laughter.

"Well you can go first then if you don't mind. I'd rather not be on that thing if it's going to collapse beneath you," she said. He nodded and took the stairs two at a time, slow at first, testing the integrity of each step. When he stepped onstage, feeling the eyes of

the crowd burn a hole through his armor, he stood there for a moment. After being assured that it would hold he motioned slightly with his index finger for Cortana to join him. She did and could feel the crowd bore holes into her with their eyes as well and they began to murmur once more. She immediately understood why John disliked being the center of attention so much.

Overholser stepped forward and spoke, "Hear me now I beg. A week ago in the Calla we heard Tian Jaffords speak in the meeting hall about the Wolves, and there I did speak myself. I told you then that to stand up to the Wolves would only invite disaster, that we would never be able to defend ourselves. That day you heard the Old Fella Callahan speak as well, speak of Andy telling him of gunslingers coming to us. We went, those of us chosen by the town, to see if there were indeed gunslingers as Andy said." He then motioned toward Roland and his ka-tet and said, "I tell you now that I was perhaps a bit too hasty with my speech a week ago. These people are indeed of the line of Eld."

At this there were a few shouts in the crowd and Cortana heard the words "Hile gunslingers," and "Praise the Man Jesus," and "Tell the gods thankee." They were quickly hushed though and the majority of the crowd remained silent waiting for what Overholser had to say next.

Overholser then stretched out his other hand and gestured towards Cortana and John, who stood a little straighter when he did so, "These two, however, are not of the line of Eld." There were loud murmurs at this, and many looks of confusion. "This machine man," Cortana bristled at this, "calls himself a Spartan, and claims to be a soldier of his people. He and his companion have agreed to stand with the gunslingers."

Overholser looked as if he was about to say more but the barely contained crowd burst with applause. They clapped loudly, many stomped their boots, and Cortana could have sworn she heard a few shout "Hile Spartan."

Roland stepped forward now and raised his hands. The crowd immediately became quiet as Roland made a long bow before them. "We will introduce ourselves in turn, and you shall know us as we shall come to know you. I am Roland Deschain son of Steven, of Gilead that was." He stepped back and allowed the others to introduce themselves in turn.

"I am Eddie Dean of New York."

"I am Susannah Dean of New York."

"I am Jake Chambers of New York."

When it came Cortana's turn to introduce herself she spoke without thinking, and would later wonder if it was indeed her talking at all. "I am CTN 0452-9, Cortana of the United Nations Space Command." She heard a large rumble ripple through the crowd and resisted the urge to cover her mouth. John was staring at her and she gave him a quick apologetic look.

The Master Chief then did something that made the people of the Calla nearly forget that this strange woman had given them a number for a

name. He reached up and grabbed his helmet and a few of the people in the crowd cringed, thinking that this robot was about to pull off his head. There was a loud hiss as his helmet came off and he tucked it neatly under his left arm. John's light blue eyes stared out into the crowd. "I am Master Chief Petty Officer Sierra 117 of the United Nations Space Command Special Warfare Division."

John heard the loud clicking of boot heels as he stepped beside the Spartan, the crowd still in stunned silence. "We are all well met along the path," he said. There was clapping, scattered at first, but then it began to build until once again they were applauding the people who had come to save their town, to save their children. Roland spread his arms out once again to silence them, "Will you open to us if we open to you?" A loud yes echoed from the crowd. "Do you see us for what we are and accept what we do?" Another yes followed. Roland did not ask for the crowd's silence again and let them roar their approval as the band that had been waiting patiently on stage began to play.

But even as the music began to play and she followed the others off stage she felt the voices prickling in her mind. (You will only find death in the Calla)

13. Chapter 13

Chapter 13: Spartans Never Die

The party had lasted well into the night, and as the band played the center of the pavilion became a makeshift dancing floor. John stood standing alone outside the pavilion just beyond the torchlight with his helmet back on. Cortana was at one of the long wooden tables with platters of food filling up a plate. She had tried some of the wine but cringed at the taste and disliked the light headed feeling it gave her, and was about to reach for a pitcher of water when another man grabbed it and filled her cup up for her.

"Thanks," she said to the man who wore a white cowboy hat and the clothes of a rancher.

"No need to thank me said Cortana, you are a guest here in the Calla. Forgive me if I do not use your full name, but I have always had trouble remembering numbers." His voice was smooth, silky, and insincere. Cortana took an immediate disliking to this man, but attempted to remain polite.

"Still, thank you."

The man nodded his head and looked around slowly, as if checking to make sure nobody else was listening. Seemingly satisfied he continued to speak. "You know said despite that lovely exhibition the gunslinger gave for the crowd there are still many in the Calla who believe that it is best to let things be as they are. The Wolves never take all the children ya know, and they only come once in a generation. Twenty-five years of peace in exchange for a raid that only lasts a few hours. A fair deal would you not agree said?"

"I would think that a better deal would be if none of the children were taken," Cortana said coolly.

"Still, only a handful of gunslingers and your Spartan to stand against eighty Wolves? Long odds indeed," the man said, putting emphasis on the word your.

"You would be surprised by what my Spartan can do, and what I can do as well."

The man smiled and nodded his head in faux agreement, "Indeed. My name is George Telford, and I have a feeling we shall speak again. The town still needs to reach a formal decision as you must know, and there will be plenty of people who will hear what I have to say. Until then, long days and pleasant nights." He left after saying this, not waiting for Cortana to respond.

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She stood beside John outside the pavilion. He seemed more relaxed now, but she could see by the way his hands were opening and closing into slight fists that he was still tense.

"You don't have to stay here with me," he said.

"And leave you here alone? Not a chance." She moved closer to him and put her hand on his back. Nobody could clearly see them outside of the light of the torches, and he did not resist. "You know I talked to Andy. He said that he could probably help take your armor off, and we are going to need to do that in order to run maintenance on it before the Wolves come. I know you don't like being outside it John butâ€|"

"It's necessary," he finished the sentence for her. "We'll do it tonight, get it over with quickly." His eyes turned to the stage where the band was playing. He then watched as Tian Jaffords walked out of the crowd and approached them.

"Sai Cortana, some of the boys of the Calla were wondering if you might come and sing for them. They seem quite enamored of you," there was a piece of straw sticking out of his mouth as he smiled at her.

Cortana shook her head, "Thanks for the offer but I.."

"Yes, she can," John said and Cortana thought for a moment about punching the Spartan in his side, even if it meant breaking all of her fingers."

"Great, they'll love it." Tian said and Cortana had just enough time to shoot John a you bastard look, becoming even more furious thinking about him grinning beneath his visor, before Tian grabbed her arm and hauled her onto the stage. The band stopped as she walked to the center, and all the eyes of the Calla were on her.

Cortana took a breath and closed her eyes, searching for a song, any song, she could possibly sing. She had sung a little when she was just an AI, something she suspected was only unique to her. Cortana had always made sure no one was around when she did this, although now she guessed that John had been able to eavesdrop on her at one point. Finally she found a song. It was an old one, from Callahan's time in fact. It had been covered by a number of bands since its release and had received new life as a drinking song during the Rain

Forest Wars. It was a favorite among the ODST's during the war with the Covenant as well, especially those of Australian descent. Opening her eyes she saw that the entire Calla was still staring at her, waiting. She took another deep breath, and began to sing. It was low at first, but her voice grew stronger as she went. The words wereâ€

_Mum and Dad and Denny saw the passing out parade at
Puckapunyal_

It was a long march from cadets

_Sixth Battalion was the next to tour and it was me who drew the
card_

We did Canugra and Shoalwater before we left

_And Townsville lined the footpaths as we marched down to the quay
_

_This clipping from the paper shows us young and strong and
clean_

And there's me in my slouch hat, me SLR, and greens

God help me, I was only nineteen

From Vung Tau riding Chinooks to the dust at Nui Dat

I'd been in and out of choppers now for months

But we made our tents a home, V.B. and pinups on the lockers

And an Asian orange sunset through the scrub

And can you tell me doctor why I still can't get to sleep

And night time's just a jungle dark and a barking M16

_And what's this rash that comes and goes can you tell me what it
means?_

God help me, I was only nineteen

_A four week operation, when each step could mean your last one on
two legs_

It was a war within yourself

_But you wouldn't let your mates down until they had you dusted
off_

So you closed your eyes and thought about something else

Then someone yelled out Contact and the bloke behind me swore

We hooked in there for hours, then a God Almighty roar

Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon

God help me, he was going home in June
I can still see Frankie drinking tinnies in the Grand Hotel
On a thirty-six hour rec. leave in Vung Tau
And I can still see Frankie, lying screaming in the jungle
Till the morphine came and killed the bloody row
And the Anzac legends didn't mention mud and blood and tears
And the stories that my father told me never seemed quite real
I caught some pieces in my back that I didn't even feel
God help me, I was only nineteen
God help me, I was only nineteen

She finished, and there was silence at first, then applause. Cortana looked into the crowd and saw that some of them were crying. Tian Jaffords came next to her, clapping as well.

"I can't say I understood half of it, but it was beautiful all the same," he said and led her off the stage. She had to grip the railing a little tighter than usual as her knees were still shaking. A rough hand tapped her shoulder, it was Roland.

"We need to talk, all of us."

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They waited until all the people had left the pavilion with the exception of Callahan, Andy, and the Jaffords who were waiting by the horses, the party having reached its climax when Cortana had walked on stage.

"What's this about?" John asked.

"Nineteen," Eddie replied running his fingers through his shoulder length hair. "It always comes back to nineteen."

"You mean the song? Its old but I don't see what it has to do with anything," Cortana said, once again standing next to the Spartan and ignoring the look Susannah was giving her.

"You don't understand, we've been seeing the number everywhere ever since we met the dark man in Oz. In the clouds, in the trees, in names and numbers. Jake show them what we mean."

Jake grabbed a stick and began to write in the dirt just as he had back in the forest. "Claudia y Inez Bachman, the woman who wrote Charlie the Choo-Choo, nineteen letters; Donald Frank Callahan, nineteen; Wayne Dale Overholser, nineteen; Benjamin Slightman Sr, nineteenâ€|"

"There are plenty of names that have nineteen letters in them, and that still has nothing to do with the song." John said, getting annoyed.

Jake shook his head, "No you don't understand, it has everything to do with everything. Its not just the names in my world and Roland's world. Your world has it as well. 343 Guilty Spark and Sierra 117. $3+4+3+1+1+7=19$. The dates we all come from. Me, Eddie, Susannah, Eddie, and Callahan all come from the 20th century. That's nineteen right there, but there is also the date you guys come from, 2557. $2+5+5+7=19$."

"And now the song you just sang, nineteen. Think, the both of you. How many petals were on the rose?" And they did think, they thought about the rose and its blood red petals, all nineteen of them.

"It can't be," Cortana said. "Everything can't come down to one number, what does nineteen even mean?"

"Nineteen is the truth," Roland said. His face remained emotionless, but his eyes glanced down at the ground. "The others have been seeing nineteen since Oz, but I have seen it longer, since I passed through the town of Tull. The man in black had passed through there before I did and had raised a man from the dead. He told the people of the town that if they ever wanted to learn about what the afterlife truly was all they would have to do is ask the resurrected man about the number nineteen. Of course they did, and the answer drove them insane." The gunslingers mouth formed into a hard line, "I put the town out of its misery." His voice was cold and unsympathetic.

(The truth will drive you insane faster than a lie ever will) the voices of rampancy whispered

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It had taken Andy an hour to get the Spartan's armor off, even with instruction from Cortana. He would stop every few minutes, making a series of clicks and buzzes, before continuing, all the time asking if John wanted his horoscope read. They were to stay with the Jaffords while they were in the Calla, and Zalia had immediately apologized that there was only one room to spare. The Jaffords had five children, two of them twins. There was also Tian's sister and Zalia's brother who were both roont. They slept out in the barn. An old man also lived with them, Zalia's grandfather Cortana had guessed, judging by the way the old man and Tian seemed to dislike each other.

Cortana was sitting on the guess bed now, having at last gotten a bath and a change of clothes when she heard the door open. John walked in, wearing clothes made of rough cotton. _Most likely the clothes worn by the roonts, given John's size_ she thought looking up at him. He sat down in a chair next to the bed.

"I promised to tell you about how I died," he said. She remembered the promise. He had made it on the first day they came to mid-world, and in all honesty she had hoped that he would forget that he made it.

"You don't have to tell me," she said.

"Yes you need to hear it."

He talked for nearly twenty minutes, and the story had the air of an

after action report. Still she had trouble looking at him as he spoke.

Infinity had returned to Requiem in order to eliminate any Covenant and Promethean forces that remained on the Forerunner planet and set up bases of operations. An artifact had been discovered, and Dr. Halsey had been called into to study it. She had discovered that the artifact was transmitting information about Infinity's systems down to Requiem. He had been given tactical command of the Spartan IVs sent down to investigate and he had been with fire team Majestic when it happened. One of the Spartan IVs, young and inexperienced, had run ahead of the rest of the team and ended up being cut off. He had moved up to assist when he saw the large shadow of a plasma mortar forming beneath the Spartan IV. John only had enough time to push him out of the way.

"Did it hurt?" Cortana asked quietly, still not able to look at him. _Seven months_, she thought_, I was only able to buy him seven months. What good am I?_

"Yes," he said, and then stood up. "I'll sleep in one of chairs out in the main part of the house. You can have the bed." He turned to leave when Cortana's hand grabbed his. Her electric blue eyes found his.

"Stay," she said and smiled. "I sleep better when you're around anyway."

He looked uncertain, and his movements lacked their usual fluidity as he climbed into the bed next to her. She didn't care, and laid her head down on his chest, closing her eyes and feeling his warm heartbeat once again. The voices were silent

For the first time since Cortana came to mid-world she did not dream, but John did.

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_At first he thought it was of Sam, of Sam laughing. It wasn't though, it was Cuthbert. He knew the man's name, the man with the same blonde hair and eyes as Sam 034, but could only guess as to how he knew. Cuthbert was standing there, revolver in his left hand, there was an arrow where his right eye had once been. It was the end of the world, the end of everything, and he was laughing. _

_ "Roland we are finished. It is the end of us, the end of Gilead," he said. There were other gunslingers around him, all with some sort of wound, their clothes caked in blood. Cuthbert pointed at the advancing column at the bottom of the hill, the slope itself littered with bodies, their chainmail glistening in the sun. "They are coming Roland, let us give them what they want."_

Yes, _he thought, a cold anger slipping into his heart. His hands gripped the revolvers he carried. He looked at the gunslingers, many of them older than him, some far better, but they all looked to him, they always looked to him. He would die with these gunslingers, as he should have died on Reach with his Spartans, as he should have died with her on the Didact's ship orbiting Earth. He would fight with them, as he should have fought with Blue Team on Onyx. Death would claim him, and all would be right in the world. This time he would

not be the last. _

_ He raised a revolver over his head and although the voice and the words they formed were not his own he meant them all the same, "Gunslingers to me! For Gilead, for the line of Eld, for The Dark Tower, and for the White! Gunslingers! Hile!"_

_ "Hile," the gunslingers shouted, raising their revolvers with him.

_

_ "Give me the horn Roland, let me blow it, one last time," Cuthbert said, fighting down the blood that was coming up his throat. Cuthbert blew the horn and the army before them seemed to hesitate. The gunslingers charged down Jericho Hill, revolvers thundering, dealing out lead as they went. _

_ The rounds in his revolvers ran empty as he smashed into the column. He brought the butt of one of them down on a helmeted head, the skull cracking beneath it. His fingers were as lightning as he reloaded. A man with a pike came at him, thrusting. He side stepped and kicked the man in the chest, bringing both revolvers up and loading two rounds into the soldiers chest. The sun, which had held the same place in the sky for hours, courtesy of the dark man himself, was blotted out. Arrows rained down around him, the archers not caring if they hit their own men, so long as they slew the gunslingers. A bolt hit his chest and he no sooner pulled it out when another one struck his knee which buckled beneath him. A body fell on top of him, pinning him to the ground. Others followed and he was crushed by the weight. The sound of gunfire ceased as darkness took him. _

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_ His eyes flew open and he moved to get from under the pile of rotting corpses. Standing he brought both revolvers up, scanning the battle for threats. There were none, he was alone. _

_ "Gunslingers!" he said, but there was no answer. A vultcher screeched at him, and he turned around. There was Cuthbert, still smiling, three arrows in his chest, his eyes glazed over. _

_ "No," he said, and this time it was both John's voice and Roland's. He sank to his knees, "No, No, No!" and for the first time since he was a child he felt tears stream down his cheeks. He was the last, once again he was the last. He would always be the last. _

14. Chapter 14

Chapter 14: Confessions with a Priest Part I "The Land of Nineteen"

A sharp pain rose up Cortana's arm, and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. John was gripping her arm, and his other hand was gripping the sheets. He was muttering in his sleep, saying something that sounded like the word no. In the soft moonlight that came from the windows she could see sweat glistening on his face.

"John, wake up," she said, shaking his shoulder. The Spartan bolted

upright, hand reaching for a gun that wasn't there, eyes scanning the dark room. "John," she said again and he seemed to calm, and then noticed his right hand still gripping Cortana's shoulder. He let go and there was a dark bruise underneath.

"I'm sorry" he said.

Cortana put her hand on his chest, noted the erratic beating of his heart, and pushed him down gently back onto the bed. "It's okay, just tell me what happened."

"I hurt you."

Cortana looked at the bruise on her arm, shrugged, and then smiled. Even in the dark the smile seemed to have its own light. "This? I'll be fine, and I've been through worse."

"But I wasn't the cause of it."

She ignored this and asked, "You were dreaming weren't you?"

"Yes," he said, and then lied. "About Sam."

Cortana reached up and put a hand on the side of his face. She then leaned forward and kissed him on his forehead. "I'm here," she said. It was all she needed to say.

"I know." Cortana put her head back on his chest and soon was back deep in her dreamless sleep. John did not sleep though, and stared at the ceiling.

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It was still early morning when they reached the rectory behind Father Callahan's church. Roland was already up, smoking his morning cigarette, and was cleaning both revolvers which were broken down in front of him with an oiled rag. Jake wouldn't be here this morning, he had befriended Benjamin Slightman's son Benny the younger and had requested to stay at their house. Much to Cortana's satisfaction Roland had agreed to this.

"Where are Susannah and Eddie?" she asked and the gunslinger's eyes actually met hers.

"Inside having breakfast. Rosalita, Callahan's housekeeper, has made coffee if you want it."

Cortana smiled, realizing this was the first time she had actually smiled at the gunslinger, "I think I would."

John was still out of his armor, although he said that he planned on running the scheduled maintenance on it that was required in the evening before donning it back on. He was wearing a longed sleeved shirt, as was Cortana. She had told him it was because it was still cold out in the morning, but he knew that the real reason was to cover up the bruise. In her hands Cortana held a small holo-projector that the Master Chief had been carrying in one of the compartments in his MJOLNIR. Certainly not capable of anything fancy, but it would get the job done.

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They had their coffee with Callahan and were now walking with the man behind the church, Cortana carrying an extra cup. The priest when seeing John for the first time out of his armor commented "You sure are a big fella, even out of all that metal." The Master Chief merely nodded. He had been silent for most of the morning, and Cortana suspected it was because of the dream that he had last night. The only time he had really spoken to her was when they saw the cloud in the sky.

The both of them had been walking for less than twenty minutes towards Callahan's place when Cortana had felt the sudden urge to look up. There in the sky, colored pink by the sun which was just beginning to peak over the horizon, was a cloud shaped like the number nineteen. "John," she had said, "Look up into the sky and tell me what you see."

John looked up for a moment, eyes scanning, and then said one word, "Nineteen." Cortana relaxed, she wasn't going crazy, despite what the rampant voices in her head might be telling her. "I've seen it before, before last night I mean," he said after a long pause.

"Where, and why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think anything of it at the time. I saw it back in New York when I was sent todash the first time. There were twenty-one books on the table inside the bookstore that Jake's past self went into. After he bought two of the books there were nineteen left."

Cortana frowned. She had seen the number nineteen before hadn't she? But where? _Andy,_ she thought. "I've seen it before too; or rather I've heard it. Two days ago when we first met the representatives from the Calla back in the forest I was alone with Andy for a little while. I asked him what he knew about the Wolves, and he locked up, asked for the password for directive nineteen."

John raised an eyebrow, "And you didn't try to force the information out of him?"

"I can still access all the information I had when I was an AI, but I still don't know how far my abilities go. I'd rather test it on something else first before I try and hack into Andy."

Cortana was shaken out of her thoughts about the conversation from earlier that morning when the group reached a secluded and shady spot behind the church. Callahan sat down as did the others, forming a small circle. Cortana set the holo-projector in the middle of the circle. "I think we should go first," she said, but Roland shook his head.

"No, I have already heard most of your tale, and have told the others much about it already. We will hear Callahan talk first," he said.

Cortana shot the gunslinger a look, what little good will she had towards him for allowing Jake to stay with a friend completely gone. She turned to John, but there was no help there. He was actually agreeing with Roland.

Callahan scratched the white hair on top of his head, "Well I'll try not to talk the day away, although no promises." He paused for a minute, trying to find a place to begin. "Ya know, like many men in the priesthood of the Holy Roman Catholic Church I had come to believe that good and evil existed only in a symbolic sense. I was wrong though, there are demons out there, embodiments of pure evil. The first demon I came across was the demon drink. I was a drunk, would take nips out of a bottle before mass, and a few more nips after it was over. I moved from parish to parish over several years because of my drinking, although I told myself that my problem was spiritual in nature, not because I liked the whiskey too much do ya kennit? The other priests with whom I sought council seemed to agree with me and that only fed the problem. The second demon I faced was truly pure evil. Alcohol is only evil in excess and to those who cannot stop themselves after a few drinks, but this thing was something far darker and much worse. He was a vampire, and his name was Barlow."

"A vampire?" Cortana said, "Those don't exist." A ridiculous statement, she would think later, considering everything they had seen already. John had raised an eyebrow at this, but said nothing. Roland, Susannah, and Eddie looked unsurprised. If anything their faces showed that they had expected something like this.

"Aye, a vampire. I don't expect you to believe me right away, but it's true. God and the Man Jesus help me it's true," Callahan said.

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"It had started in a town called Jerusalem's Lot. People were starting to go missing, although only one boy ever showed up dead. A few of the townspeople who had figured out what was going on came to me for help. Of course I didn't believe them at first, evil only exists in a symbolic sense, or so I had convinced myself. In all honesty I thought they were crazy, but the truth always reveals itself in the end. We formed a group, a ka-tet you might call it gunslinger, to hunt the vampire down. At first we only found his victims. They were by all rights dead, no pulse, no breathing, nothing to indicate that they were alive. But when we drove the stakes through their hearts," Callahan paused at this and stared down at the ground. "The screams. Those screams from Barlow's victims as we drove those stakes through their hearts and into the ground." He brought his hand up to his face and let out a ragged breath before continuing.

"Barlow was old. How old exactly I can't say but I suspect he was one of the originals, one of the handful left in all the worlds. I confronted him myself, alone. He had taken one of the boys of the town after killing his parents. I raised my cross up at him and it glowed a pure white light which pierced into the vampire's skin. In the distraction the child escaped, but eventually the light from the cross faded away, my faith had failed. Barlow plucked the cross out of my hand, and crushed it. At first I thought he was going to kill me but instead he did something much worse. He cut a gash into the side of his throat and forced my mouth to it."

"You drank," Eddie said.

Callahan nodded, "Yes I drank. An alcoholic always drinks. I was unclean; I could feel it inside me. The doors to my own church wouldn't open for me. For years after words the only colors I could see were white, grey, and red. Crimson red. I wasn't a vampire that much I could be thankful for, but I was broken. I ran, like a coward I ran from the town and abandoned all the people in it. Caught the first greyhound bus to New York and got piss ass drunk the first day I arrived. Eventually I sobered up and began working at a soup kitchen for minimum wage. The Home it was called." He then looked at John and Cortana. "It was right by the United Nations building come to think of it."

"A coincidence," John said, although there were festering seeds of doubt in his mind.

"No, it was ka," Roland said and then rolled his fingers Callahan to continue.

"There was a man who I worked with there, his name was Lupe Delgado. He became a good friend of mine, helped me when nobody else would. You could say that I loved him. Guess that makes me a faggot doesn't it?" he asked and Cortana shook her head.

"No it doesn't, and it wouldn't matter even if it did." Callahan smiled at her, but it was a fake smile.

"There was a physical attraction though, not the same I would get when seeing a pretty lady walk by, but I thought he was beautiful all the same. I was working in the kitchen washing dishes when I saw it. Lupe was standing in the alleyway, seemed to be in a deep sleep. Biting into his neck was another vampire. Not the same as Barlow though. This one was younger, weaker, and far less cunning. Mosquitoes I came to think of them. I buried a butcher's knife into the creature's head and his body turned to dust, leaving only his clothes which were easy enough to clean up. Lupe never remembered what happened, but he lasted only a few months after that. Began to feel weak, dizzy, and there were sores that appeared on his skin."

"He had AIDS didn't he? Got it from the vampire," Eddie said.

"Yes, AIDS. I suppose that was what it was. At the time they called it something like Gay Immune Deficiency Syndrome although I can't say for sure. All I know for sure is that he died, and I got drunk again right after his funeral," he paused again thinking.

"I left New York after that and spent several years drifting. I don't know if it was Barlow's blood in me or some punishment cast down from the hand of God, but there was something different about the America I was traveling across at the time. Roads that were there one day would be gone the next. You could pull a ten dollar bill out of your pocket and Alexander Hamilton would be on the face of it one day and Aaron Burr the next. Jimmy Carter would be president one week and George Wallace would be president the week after that. I would go to sleep underneath a bed of newspapers beneath a sign that said Shelton Shop Rd. and the next morning it would read Courthouse Rd."

"You were in the land of nineteen my friend," Eddie said at this and Callahan gave him a puzzled look.

"What do you mean by that son?" he said.

"Nothing, never mind," Eddie said and Callahan looked at him for a moment with that same puzzlement on his face before he started speaking again.

"I hunted vampires during those days, the weaker ones anyway. I came to see them everywhere, killed more of them than I could keep count. I even had a system going, work as a day laborer for a few days, get drunk as a skunk, and hunt the mosquitoes in my spare time. That lasted for a while, until I started to get noticed. There would be graffiti on the bathroom walls with my description on it, wanted pet signs too. If I stayed in an area too long there would be more of them, and if I stayed long enough I would see them. They looked like men, at least well enough to where if you passed them in the street you wouldn't bother glancing at them twice. But they're not, far from it. They were the low men, and they were hunting me."

"The can-toi, foot soldiers of The Crimson King," Roland said.

"Aye that's what they were. I managed to stay one step ahead of them for years, although I had to quite killing vampires in order to get them off my trail. One day I woke up in a gutter from a night of drinking covered in piss and mud. I promised to God then that I would quite for good, and I did. Started going to AA meeting in Detroit, even started working at a soup kitchen again. After a while I stopped seeing the graffiti and dog posters calling for my head, and I thought I was safe. One day though in 1983 I got an offer to receive a donation to the soup kitchen in the mail. Of course I couldn't resist, we barely scraped by on the funds that we had. I arrived at a building where I was to meet the people who were donating on the nineteenth floor— everybody, including John and Cortana, looked at each other when he said this. "It was a trap though; the room I entered into was full of low men and vampires. They didn't want to kill me, just have one of the vampires infect me. I couldn't live with that, not again. I broke free and crashed through one of the windows and out into the clear air. I can still remember hearing my bones crack as I hit the sidewalk. At first there was pain, and then nothing, and then the desert."

"You woke up in a stable didn't you, at a place called the way station," Cortana asked, already knowing the answer.

Callahan's eyes grew wide, "Yes I did. How on earth did you know that?"

"Me and John died as well and wound up there," she said and then felt John's elbow briefly brush her shoulder. It was the most amount of physical comfort he would be capable of giving her in front of other people, but she was still glad for it.

"Did you see him, the dark man?" Callahan asked, his breaths becoming shallow.

"Yes,"

"Did you see his eyes?"

"No, they were hidden underneath his hood."

"You should be thankful to God then. I saw them, dear God I saw them. Right before he pushed me through the door. He gave me black thirteen before he did, said that if he did not kill the gunslinger under the mountains, at the edge of the western sea, or in Lud, then that thing surely would. The Manni found me in a cave just outside of the Calla and would later tell me that I had been comatose for five days."

"And now black thirteen is in your church," Roland said mildly. He had already begun to light another cigarette.

"Yes and its come alive. It has already tried to reach out to me, and I can hear the chimes coming from it at night," Callahan said and then attempted to steady himself. Eventually his breathing became normal again.

"We shall see it then, before the Spartan tells his tale." Roland stood as did Callahan. Eddie and Susannah remain sitting.

"You said that black thirteen was too dangerous to use," John said standing as well.

"It is, but we might now have a choice. Not when the rose, the only thing currently holding all of existence together is in danger. If there is another way we will use that, but I doubt there is."

Cortana stood as well but John shook his head and said, "Stay here. If this thing is dangerous I don't want you going in."

"And what about you Chief, are you just going to go waltzing into danger? Again I might add," she said, crossing her arms and fighting a wince caused by the bruise on her shoulder.

John's eyes glanced at her shoulder as she did this and he said, "I've already put you in enough danger."

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They passed a fountain of holy water as they walked into the church. Callahan dipped his hand inside and crossed himself, but the Spartan and the gunslinger ignored it. They came to a room in the back of the church, and the fresh scent of pine from the wooden walls filled the air.

"It's here," Callahan whispered, prying a floorboard up from the floor. There was a black wooden chest inside with the markings of a rose, a stone, and a door on top of it.

There was a strange pulling on John's chest when the priest showed them the chest, and then it moved to his arms. There were bells, they were calling to him, and he heard voices coming from the chest.

(Use it. Use it and keep her safe) they said. His arm twitched forward and although the movement was to subtle for the priest to notice, Roland did. The gunslinger put his arm in front of John's and although the two men did not touch it was enough to keep the Spartan from reaching out. The voices and the bells stopped.

"Will you take it?" Callahan asked, his voice beyond hopeful.

"Only if there is no other choice," Roland said.

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They were rising inside of her, the voices, not two minutes since John and Roland had followed Callahan inside the church. Out of the corner of her vision she saw a great Crimson Red eye, unblinking. If Cortana tried to look at the eye it would disappear, but it was always there, watching, calling out to her. She tried to fight the voices, push them down as she had before, but it was no use. They were not just coming from inside her head this time, but also from the church, from black thirteen. The voices flooded over her mind and screamed in their fury.

(The Gunslinger is the truth. Roland is the truth.)

(The Prisoner is the truth. Eddie is the truth)

(The Lady of Shadows is the truth. Susannah is the truth.)

(The Priest is the truth. Callahan is the truth.)

(The Warrior is the truth. John 117 is the truth.)

(The Intellect is the truth. You are the truth.)

(Death is the truth. Jake is the truth.)

(Nineteen is the truth. Nineteen is the truth. Nineteen is the truth. Nineteen is the truth.)

"Cortana!" Susannah shouted. Eddie had grabbed Cortana's shoulders and she was lying on the ground.

"What happened?" she said weakly, attempting to bring her mind back into focus.

"You started shaking and mumbling, fell down on the ground," Eddie said. "I'll go get the others." He started to stand up when Cortana grabbed him by the collar.

"No you can't tell him, he can't know. He just got me back, he can't know I'm still broken," Cortana said, "Promise me you won't tell him Eddie."

Eddie looked unsure and then nodded, "Alright, but if this happens again I will. You have my word on that."

"Cortana," Susannah said. "Your eyes, they're red."

She was right, Cortana's vision was red, as if a blood vessel had broken in both eyes. She blinked hard, and then again, before her vision returned to normal.

15. Chapter 15

Chapter 15: Confessions with a Priest Part II "Greek, Roman, and Vietnam"

Paper was rare in mid-world, had been rare even in the days of Gilead, at least that was what Roland would tell them later. The art of making paper had been all but lost when the Old People vanished, and had been completely lost when John Farson's armies had destroyed the Inner Baronies. So there was little surprise at the reaction of the twins when Roland folded the piece of paper they handed him in half. The twins themselves were named Frank and Francine; they were maybe ten years old and had a matching set of nearly white blonde hair and green eyes. Roland had commissioned them to draw a map of the Calla on a thin delicate piece of paper earlier that morning and as he and John walked out of the church with Father Callahan the twins brought the map to the gunslinger.

Roland took the map from the twins, examined its quality, and after seeming to be satisfied with it said, "This is no longer a piece of paper, it is a tool do you kennit? A tool that may save many lives when the Wolves come."

"Yes," the twins said simultaneously, although it really didn't look like they fully understood exactly what the gunslinger was saying to them. Cortana had a brief image of one of the twins being taken by the Wolves less than twenty-four days from now and coming back from the land of Thunderclap mere shadows of their former selves. Roont.

"And because it is a tool, we must now treat it like such, even though I'm sure that what I am about to do may seem like blasphemy to you." Roland's voice sounded slightly apologetic, but his face was anything but. The gunslinger then took the map and folded it in half. The twins gasped and Francine almost looked like she was about to cry. They watched as Roland took the folded map and placed it unceremoniously into his satchel. Cortana watched the twins walk away, their faces sullen, before turning on Roland.

"You could have been a bit nicer about it, or at least waited till they were gone to do that."

"Mayhap," Roland said. That was all he said.

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They were sitting back in the circle, John once again beside Cortana, and the holo-projector back in the middle. Cortana ignored the looks of concern that Eddie and Susannah were giving her, knowing full well that John would notice the looks as well, and cleared her throat before speaking.

"This is Harvest," she said, sliding a data chip into the holo-projector which in turn showed a small green and blue planet, illuminating the group in a soft glow. "It was the furthest of the outer colonies, its economy was based primarily on agriculture, and it had a population of roughly 300,000."

Eddie let out a low whistle at the image and Susannah said, "Forget what Kennedy said about going to the moon by the end of decade, that's what I call impressive." Callahan seemed to have a similar sense of awe and Cortana felt slightly guilty about what was going to come next. She looked at Roland, who had the familiar expression of boredom on his face, and then at John who nodded his head at her to

continue.

"On February 3rd 2525 Harvest's orbital station made contact with this object," the image changed to show a purple organic looking blur. "All contact with the colony of Harvest was lost soon after words. On October 3rd a battle group was sent to the colony in order to investigateâ€|"

"Why the long wait?" Eddie asked.

"Slipspace travel isn't instantaneous Eddie, and it took some time to put the battle group together," Cortana replied, although she knew that the UNSC's heavy bureaucracy was also to blame for the long delay. "Three ships were part of the battle group but only one, the Hercules, managed to make its way back to the inner colonies. This is what they found." Again the image changed and this time instead of a pristine agricultural paradise, Harvest was a burning crystal ball of ash and glass.

"My God," Callahan said, and crossed himself. Eddie and Susannah had much of the same reaction, and Roland even raised an eyebrow.

"That is what a glassed world looks like," John said, breaking the silence. "And for nearly a quarter of a century this was the only message we ever received from the Covenant." He glanced over at Cortana who pressed a button on the holo-projector which emitted an audio recording of the Covenant's formal declaration of war against humanity.

"Your destruction is the will of the gods, and we are their instruments."

"Heathens," Callahan said, once again making the sign of the cross in front of him.

"Yes they are, but not because they don't worship your god." Cortana said.

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They spent what was left of the morning and much of the afternoon showing world after world that had been rendered as little more than balls of glass by the military juggernaut that was the Covenant Empire. Roland seemed to take an active interest in the tale only once, when Cortana had shown them footage of Spartan's in combat, and spent the rest of the time impassively soaking up the information like a sponge. He had heard most of the story before in any case.

"These Spartans, the gunslingers of your world," Roland said and John tensed at these words although not as much as Cortana expected him to, "They were created by your mother?" The question was sincere enough but his eyes seemed to hold a sliver of doubt when he said the word _mother_.

"Yes, that's actually when I came into the picture. It was called Operation Red Flag, and it was suppose to end the war. The mission was to capture a member of the Covenant hierarchy and use them as a bargaining chip in order to force peace talks. I was selected for my ability to hack into Covenant systems, and I chose the Chief to be my

guardian. The mission was canceled though after the Fall of Reach." Cortana said, once again skirting around the small detail that she had been, and to some degree still was, and AI. Eddie and Susannah exchanged glances, but said nothing.

"So why did you pick him? Cry yer pardon but most of those Spartans look almost exactly the same," Callahan said, and Cortana smiled at him.

"I chose him because he was lucky."

"No, not luck." Roland said, but nothing else. He was still looking at the image of a lifeless planet that had once been the fortress world of Reach. Eddie was staring at it too.

"Greek, Roman, and Vietnam," he muttered. John tilted his head at him and Eddie gave him a slight smirk, "It's a phrase that my older brother used to say. He was a Vietnam veteran. Got drafted into a war he didn't want to fight, went half a world away to get shot at for Uncle Sam, and made it back home mostly in one piece so that he could have the pleasure of being spit on by protesters who called him a baby killer." The smirk faded from Eddie's face and his eyes stared through the holo-projection. Susannah put a hand on his shoulder.

They continued past the Fall of Reach, and onto Halo. A weapon of last resort built by an ancient race called the Forerunners for one singular purpose, to destroy all life in the galaxy and render it clean of the virulent parasite known as the Flood. During the Battles of Installations 04 and 05 the Flood had once again been released into the galaxy. Cortana knew the others wanted to see the Flood before they even asked her, but still she hesitated.

She looked to the Master Chief who said, "You don't have to if you don't want to."

Cortana smiled, "I do have to though, or they are going to wonder why we didn't show them." She turned to the others who were waiting patiently, all except for Roland who looked to be on the verge of twirling his fingers in the hurry up gesture again. "During the Battle of Installation 05 I was captured by the Flood's central intelligence who called himself the Gravemind. He tortured me for several weeks before the Chief came to rescue me." She looked at John and briefly wanted to hold his hand, but thought better of it.

"Why," Eddie asked. "I mean why not just infect you like you say these things can do?" Cortana shrugged her shoulders. It was getting harder to maintain the lie and she was starting to wonder whether it was worth maintaining at all. She took a deep breath and then programmed the holo-projector to play a video log.

"This is from the Master Chief's helmet cam when he went back into High Charity, the Covenant capital city, in order to rescue me." She pressed play. An image appeared of a hallway covered in dark orange organic tissue. Bulbous shaped infection forms swarmed in front of the Chief and he unloaded his assault rifle into them, the creatures popping with a sickening hiss as the bullets impacted. Just as the magazine ran dry a combat form, with the twisted and broken head of what had once been a human marine sticking out of a mass of tentacles

and organic mush, jumped down from the ceiling and pinned the Spartan to the ground. The Master Chief pulled out a combat knife and stabbed the infection form hidden within the rotting undead corpse right where the heart used to be. He kicked the creature off of him and stood up. A voice, deep and numerous as a chorus of thousands, echoed through the walls of High Charity and bounced off the back of Callahan's church. A shiver ran up Cortana's shoulders as it spoke.

"Child of my enemy why have you come? I offer no forgiveness for the father's sins passed to his son." The image from the holo-projector flooded blue and the sound of Cortana's voice, laughing and crying at the same time, came through the speakers. The Gravemind spoke again. "Of course you came for her. We exist together now, two corpses in one grave."

Cortana stopped the video log after this, and she could feel John's light blue eyes on her. "Sorry, it's not something I'm particularly fond of reliving." She felt a hand creep into hers, it was Susannah's.

"We can finish up later if you want hon, it's getting late anyway. Can't we Roland?" she eyed the gunslinger who shrugged his shoulders in resignation.

"Soon," he said. "Very soon."

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The plan for that night was for Eddie, Susannah, Cortana, and John to go to the Jaffords to talk with Zalia Grand Pere. He was the oldest man in the Calla, and therefore had seen the most raids by the Wolves. He would, theoretically at least, be able to provide them with the most information about the creatures, although Cortana had her doubts. The old man seemed to have a failing memory at best, and was completely senile at worse.

"You guys aren't planning on staying the night are you?" Cortana asked, "There is only one spare bedroom and the house is pretty crowded as it is."

"Don't worry sugar," Susannah said with a wink before glancing over at John. "Me and Eddie are going back to Callahan's after we talk to Zalia's Grand Pere. You can have the bed all to yourself." The implication Susannah made forced Cortana to try her best not to blush, and not for the first time she wished she had control of her emotional subroutines. As the others left John stopped her. He waited for the others to leave before talking.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She had expected this question after the looks of worry that Susannah and Eddie had openly given her.

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I guess I could say nothing, but I already tried that once didn't I?"

"Yes," he said, his shoulders were sagging. "Is it rampancy?"

She reached out and grabbed his hand, "Not right now okay? I'll tell you tonight, I promise."

"I'll hold you to that," he said, gripping her hand in return.

"You know I'm going to miss you being out of your armor," she said smiling. He was actually starting to get somewhat of a tan, maybe even a sunburn if he wasn't careful.

John shrugged, "The maintenance, may take longer than I originally planned."

"I thought you said it shouldn't take you more than a few hours?"

"No reason not to be thorough."

Cortana gripped his hand tighter, "Thank you John."

16. Chapter 16

Chapter 16: The Prisoner

The Jaffords' homestead, which had been full near to the brim already with the addition of Cortana and John, now had little more than basic elbow room in the kitchen where the family had their meals because of the night's inclusion of Eddie and Susannah. The two roont siblings of Tian and Zalia were made to sit out on the porch to eat, as there was no room left at the large table. The roonts ate what they always demanded, taters and gravy, and Cortana thought it was a wonder that they managed to survive on a diet that lacked almost all the basic vitamins and nutrients.

John of course, had wanted to talk to Zalia's Grand-Pere prior to the dinner, and would have avoided the dinner altogether if Cortana had not given him a stern lecture about common curtesy when it came to being a guest at someone else's home. There was another reason why he endured the loud whines of the five children at their mother and father's constant scolding on how to mind their manners in front of company.

"Grand-Pere is always a bit brighter after he has his meal in him. You may be in luck when it comes to talking to him about the Wolves. Today is one of his bright days." Zalia had said.

So he is senile, John thought, watching as Grand-Pere complained that he had not yet had a single loaf of buttered bread, before being reminded by Zalia that he had already eaten five. _Yes, definitely senile_, the Spartan thought. He had little hope that this eighty year old man could tell them anything about the Wolves that was of value.

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John sat impatiently on the front porch with Eddie watching the old man try to unsuccessfully light a pipe of tobacco, his shaking arthritic hands putting the match he used out.

"Here let me get that for you," Eddie said, striking his own match and lighting the pipe.

"Thank you son," Grand-Pere said, taking a long puff. "My memory is

not what it used to be ya ken, what is your name again?"

"My name is Eddie Dean of New York."

"New York," the old man said, taking another drag. "Strange name I spect."

"Strange place," Eddie said, smiling. The old man turned to the Spartan.

"And you, yur the feller who had a number for a name dn't ya?"

"Yes, Sierra 117," John said sighing. They were getting nowhere fast.

"Don't know what kind of parents would name their kid 127, but not my place I guess. Tell me is the brownie yurs?"

"Brownie?" John asked, puzzled, and of all people he looked to Eddie for help.

"The brownie's name is Susannah and she's my wife." Eddie said his voice humorless.

The old man nodded his head and turned back to John, "So the dark haired one is yours then huh?" He laughed and slapped the Spartan on his thigh. When his hand lifted John moved his leg slightly away from the Grand-Pere. "Good, for a man of your age to get em so young. Why if I twere a yunger manâ€¦" his voice trailed off. "Tell me have we had dinner yet?"

John sighed again and looked at Eddie, "We're wasting our time with him." He was about to stand up when the Grand-Pere's hand snapped out like a cobra and grabbed his arm. John was surprised by the strength the old man still had left in him. His eyes, which had been all but glazed over before, were now sharp and intelligent. The heavy accent he had carried was almost nearly gone.

"I ask because if I'm gonna start talking about Wolves I need a meal in me. Now I don't care if you walk around in a metal suit and call yourself a Spartan, or that you have those damn gunslinger eyes. If you want to hear what a dead Wolf looks like you will sit and listen."

"You have seen a dead wolf?" Eddie asked skeptically, echoing John's thoughts.

"Yur bugger. I'm having a clear moment now. It won't last long so don't interrupt me while I speak. My memory is not what it used to be, but when it comes to the Wolves I remember just fine. I was nineteen at the time, and there were four of us. We were young, angry, foolish, and tired. We were tired of the way the whole Calla just laid on their bellies and let the Wolves come for the children and return them to us roont. Our siblings, our sons and daughters, one out of every two returned roont. It twere me, Pokey Slidell, Eamon and Molly Doolin who stood out on that road that day waiting for the Wolves to ride pass." He took another puff from his pipe, letting the smoke roll out of his mouth. He didn't notice it fall to the ground when he put it onto the armrest of the rocking chair. Nor did he notice Eddie picking it up. He just continued to speak.

"Ah that Molly Doolin. Prettiest woman in all of the Calla at the time. Why if she hadn't been marriedâ€|ah who am I foolen, wouldn't have had a chance either way. Me, Pokey, and Eamon had our bah's," John suspected he meant bows "and Molly had her riza. Don't suspect you outlanders know what a riza is do ya?" He held out both shaking hands to make a circle that was about a foot in diameter. "It's a blue weighted plate made out of what Andy calls Titanium. The entire rim of the plate is sharpened finer than a razor with the exception of the handhold. It was the weapon of Oriza goddess of the rice, or so the old stories say. The women throw it for fun here in the Calla, and Zalia is actually a decent shot with it." He reached for the pipe that wasn't there. Eddie tried to hand it back to him but the old man seemed to lose interest.

"We all expected to die that day, had no doubts in our minds that we would. It felt right though, what we twere doin. Four wolves came down the road we were on, riding those grey horses. We men fired first with our bahs, and one actually struck a horse in the neck, for all the good it did that is. Those are not normal horses. The other two bolts struck the Wolves right in the chest, but they bounced off." _Battle armor_ John thought at this, "Molly though, she waited right until the Wolves were almost on top of us, had killed her husband and Pokey already with those sneetches, but she just stood there. Molly threw the riza and hit a Wolf on the bulge of his head right here," Grand-Pere pointed at the top of his skull. "The Wolf fell right off his horse twitchen. She never got off another shot though; one of those light sticks cut off her arm and set her on fire. I got knocked into a ditch and played dead until the Wolves left." The old man's eyes were red now, he reached for a handkerchief in the breast pocket of his shirt and dabbed at them.

"All my friends died and I survived because I played coward in a ditch." He looked at John, "Do ya have any idea what tis like son. To feel guilty for being the last one standing?"

"Yes," John said, and the old man nodded. He then looked around, seeming confused.

"Have we had dinner yet?" he asked.

"How about we get you inside and find something for you to eat," Eddie said. "Chief, help me get him back into the house." He had just grabbed the old man under the arm to lift him up when a wrinkled hand grabbed Eddie by the collar.

"I saw what is behind the masks they wear," Grand-Pere said, his voice a whisper. "I only ever told one other person what I saw, my son. He didn't believe me but you must."

John leaned down and asked, "What did you see?" The old man answered.

The answer was nineteen.

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Cortana looked disapprovingly at the sink full of dishes, and then at the bucket of murky water fresh from the Jaffords' well that they were expected to clean them with. "Tell me again why we got stuck

with the cleaning while the Chief and Eddie get to talk with Zalia's Grand-Pere?"

"I volunteered for us to clean because I wanted to talk to you alone Cortana," Susannah said. She opened the door to the kitchen slightly to make sure nobody was eves dropping before closing it again and rolling her wheel-chair up to Cortana who knew what question was coming next. "What are you?" Susannah asked.

Not who are you, but what Cortana thought. "I guess this is about what happened at the church isn't it?"

"That and a few other things," Susannah said folding her arms. "Roland says that he has seen your eyes flash red several times, then me and Eddie saw it too when you started shaking and mumbling nonsense earlier today."

Cortana reached for the holo-projector that was still in the pocket of her jeans and placed it on the kitchen table, causing Susannah to raise her eyebrows. Cortana made a forced smile, "It's going to be a lot easier to show you rather than tell you. I'm not exactly sure if I can do this so bear with me." She then reached out, touching the holo-projector with her index finger, and closed her eyes. Cortana felt the sharp crack of electricity flow through her, and then her consciousness melted out of her body. She opened her eyes again and her perspective had changed. Her hologram stood a foot off the table, and for a moment she wondered how she had managed to spend most of her life from such a limited viewpoint. Her corporeal body was still standing there with its eyes closed, and Susannah looked like her knees would have buckled beneath her if she still had legs.

"Iâ€uhâ€well. I wasn't expecting this," Susannah said, attempting to compose herself.

Cortana's hologram smirked a little, "Okay so I lied a little. Dr. Halsey wasn't my actual mother, she just created me. I am a military grade UNSC AI, the most advanced one ever made I might add."

"So you are like Andy?"

"No I'm a smart AI, not a stupid robot," Cortana said. It came out sounding angrier than she intended and her voice became synthetic, losing all of its organic quality. Her hologram began to flicker and grow red as looked down at her transparent feet. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that. I haven't been functioning properly for quite a while." With that Cortana let her mind flood back into her corporeal body, and she had to blink several times to stop seeing red.

"You're rampant," Susannah said. "That condition you said Blaine the Mono and that 343 Guilty Spark had."

"Yes," Cortana said quietly, "I was created eight years ago not counting the seven months that passed between my death and landing in mid-world. I was only ever given a life expectancy of seven years to begin with. I sacrificed myself to save the Chief before I let that happen though."

(You were a fool) the voices said.

"Yes, I guess I was a fool to think that having an actual body would save me from rampancy."

"How long do you have, and does the Master Chief know?" Susannah asked. She had wheeled herself up to Cortana and was holding the woman's hand. Cortana was comforted by the gesture. Whether Susannah knew it or not, having a split personality made her the closest person she could possibly relate to when it came to rampancy.

"I won't die, at least I don't think so. I'll just go insane, and there is no telling how long I have before that happens. The Chief already knows, I'm going to tell him tonight about it."

"You better, it's no good keeping secrets between the two of you. He cares about you, I can see that much."

Cortana chuckled a little, but it came out sounding forced, "He is nearly twice my biological age and six times my actual age. He can't even show any affection towards me unless we are alone." She looked at Susannah. "Are you going to tell the others about this?"

"I'll have to tell Eddie because he already knew that I was going to talk to you. I won't tell Roland though; he's not very fond of machines. Had too many bad experiences with them."

"Figures," Cortana said, "Why do you even follow him?"

"That's a fair question I guess. Essentially he did kidnap us from our own times and dragged us kicking and screaming into mid-world. But if it wasn't for I would have never met Eddie and he would most likely be dead." Cortana tilted her head at Susannah, curious. Susannah sighed, "Eddie's not going to like me talking about his. In 1987 he was addicted to heroin, badly. He got in deep with Enrico Balazar, the guy who was trying to strong arm Calvin Tower into selling the lot that has the rose in 1977. He ended up having to smuggle drugs from South America into New York for Balazar in order to pay off his debts."

The Prisoner, Cortana thought. A prisoner of heroin. These names, no they were not names they were symbols, all meant something. The Gunslinger, The Warrior, The Intellect, and The Priest were easy enough to figure out. Now she knew why Eddie Dean was called The Prisoner by the voices that came from inside her and from Black Thirteen. Now that just left two, The Lady of Shadows for Susannah, and Death for Jake.

"So let me guess, Roland just happened to open a doorway into his time and came waltzing in to brighten up the day," Cortana said, not giving voice to her own thoughts.

Susannah laughed, although what she said next made that laugh seem a bit morbid, "If by brightening up the day you mean killing every single person that was in Balazar's building at the time and dragging Eddie off into mid-world by the scruff of his neck then yes. Although like I said if Roland hadn't of done that Eddie would have likely died. If Balazar hadn't killed him then the heroin would have."

"Killing is what Roland does best then," Cortana said sourly.

"Can you say the same for the Master Chief?"

"No I guess not," Cortana said frowning slightly. She then thought of Roland letting Jake fall into the abyss under the mountains. "Just tell me one thing. If it came between saving one of you and making it to The Dark Tower, which would he choose?"

"The Dark Tower," Susannah said almost immediately. "Always The Dark Tower."

â€|

They laid in the bed in the same position they were in the night before, John flat on his back with his head in the pillow, and Cortana with her head on his chest.

"It doesn't make any sense," Cortana said.

"I didn't understand it either until Eddie explained it to me," John said, staring up at the ceiling.

"And the Grand-Pere's description of what the Wolves' look like with their masks off?"

"Exactly nineteen words long."

"What does it mean John?"

"I don't know." Cortana buried her head deeper into the Spartan's chest. "How bad is it?" he asked and she shifted to look at him.

"Same as before. The voices are there, just as many as before only now they always say the same thing. I have dreams, bad ones, usually about the dark man."

"Do you think he has anything to do with this?"

"Probably, but I think getting rid of him would only be a temporary solution to rampancy." She felt his fist clench underneath her.

"But you can't say for sure," he said.

"John, don't,"

"I won't lose you again."

"And that's what I'm afraid of. I've seen what he can do. The dark man is not someone you can kill with bullets, if he can even be killed at all."

"I can take that chance."

Cortana rubbed her hand through John's graying hair, "I can't, but I suppose I won't be able to make you promise not to try."

"No," he said, and Cortana surprised him by smiling.

"You are a hard man to love John." The corner of his mouth twitched slightly and he raised an eyebrow. Cortana's smile grew at the look

he gave her, "Don't expect me to say that again."

"I don't" he said, and Cortana leaned forward to kiss him.

17. Chapter 17

Chapter 17: The Lady of Shadows

Twenty-Two Days until the Coming of the Wolves

A shadow of a knife cut through her blissfully dreamless sleep. It was a voice. Not the voice of the man in black, the voices of rampancy, or the voice that came from Black Thirteen. This voice was Jake's.

(Wake up) his voice said.

Cortana opened her eyes sat up and looked around. John was still sleeping, if Jake was in the room talking to her John surely would have been woken up by it. Jake's voice rang again, and this time she knew it was coming from inside her own mind.

(Meet me by the Jaffords' barn)

Cortana looked back down at the still apparently sleeping John and reluctantly left the bed, the whispers of rampancy coming back as soon as her body breaks contact with his. She thinks about putting on her boots, but decides against it. The heavy thud that the boots made on the wooden floor would be enough to wake John, and she would be risking enough just by opening the door to get out of the room. The hinges give a soft squeak as she pushes it open, and Cortana half expects John to be right beside her in an instant. He isn't though and Cortana slowly makes her way through the house, heel to toe to avoid creaking floor boards, and feels the soft dirt and cool grass on her feet as she steps outside. The moon was beginning to wane but the stars provided enough illumination for her to easily find her way to the barn. At first Cortana sees nothing, and her heart begins to sink thinking, _just one step closer to insanity. _Then out of the corner of her eyes she sees a dark shadow within one of the bushes shift. The shadow raises a hand, and beckons her forward. It was Jake.

"What did you do and how did you do that Jake?" she asks in a whisper once she approaches Jake, kneeling down on one knee as he was.

"I reached out to you," Jake said, and then added. "Roland calls it the touch."

"The touch?"

"Yeah. I've had it ever since I died the second time. I can reach out and talk to people with my mind, hear conversations that other people are having in my head even if I'm miles away, like the one you had with Father Callahan," the boy hesitated for a moment, "And I can sometimes read people's minds."

Cortana didn't even think to question if Jake was telling the truth, and the reason why went beyond the fact that she had heard his voice in her mind. _I trust him, _she thought. _I don't know the exact

reason why yet but I trust him_. If John was her Spartan, then Jake was her gunslinger. "Have you tried to read my mind?" she asks.

Jake bit his lower lip, "I don't try to, but sometimes things slip out."

"What did you hear?"

"Surface thoughts, mostly about John, but I also know that you're sick." He gave her a guilty look, "I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry Jake. It's not your fault," she rubbed his right shoulder and Jake gave her a smile. "So why did you want me out here?"

"I didn't want to be alone."

"Why?"

Jake pointed across the field opposite the barn and away from the house. A shadow was propelling itself across the high grass on two arms, the stumps of her legs being dragged behind her body. Cortana immediately recognized it as Susannah, or at least it was Susannah's body. The personality that was now in control was Mia. Something clicked in Cortana's mind and she saw a brief image of a woman who seemed to be both laughing and crying at the same time. _The Lady of Shadows_, she thought_, Susannah is called that because of her split personality_.

"It's not a split personality," Jake said, again looking a bit guilty. "It's something else that's inside her, something far worse."

"Something worse, like what?"

"I don't know yet, but whatever it is she calls herself Mia. She is pregnant, and she is afraid of us."

"I already knew her name was Mia," Cortana said and Jake looked at her accusingly. It was her turn to look guilty. "I saw her do something like this back when we were still in the forest."

"Roland told you not to tell me and Eddie." Jake said. It wasn't a question, and Cortana saw the boy's right hand clench slightly into a fist although his face showed not a trace of anger. Jake turned his attention back to Susannah/Mia. Cortana followed his gaze and saw the divided woman pounce on one of the Jaffords' small piglets. Even in the faint moonlight Cortana could see blood spurt out like a fountain as the piglet's throat was torn open.

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Twenty Days until the Coming of the Wolves

The weight of the assault rifle tugged at her arms as she followed Roland and the elder Manni up the steep winding path that led up to the cave where Father Callahan had been found after he had been pushed through the doorway by the man in black. She thought about what the distance might be from what the Manni called the Doorway Cave to the bed she shared with John in the Jaffords' guest bedroom

which had become her favorite place not only in the Calla and mid-world, but in all of the realities that revolved around the nexus that was The Dark Tower. _Nineteen kilometers, nineteen miles, or is it nineteen wheels as Roland calls them?_ she thought, skirting past a large boulder that jutted out of the cliff face.

Cortana had been surprised that John had not protested her going with the gunslinger to the cave. He had seemed a little more accepting of Roland ever since they had spent that first night in the Calla when John had woken up from the nightmare. She didn't press him as to why, and had a feeling that she did not want to know the answer. What had surprised her more was the reason why Roland had asked her to accompany him.

"The Manni elder Henchick has asked for you specifically." Roland had said to her.

"Who are the Manni anyway?" she had asked him.

"They are a sect of people who have dedicated their lives to finding the holes in reality, the todash highways to other worlds. The older Manni folk have usually been able to see into at least a few worlds. I have had dealings with them before and I warn you, do not lie to them or give partial truths. They will smell it on you." The gunslinger said.

Henchick himself was a man of at least seventy if not eighty, with a scraggly white beard that lay wild and untamed across his chin. He wore nearly all black, although the color did not have the same inherent malevolence to it as when the dark man wore it, and his eyes were a dull grey. What the old Manni had said to her and Roland when he greeted them nearly made her freeze in place.

"Hile Roland Deschain, last gunslinger of Gilead that was, and sai Cortana ancilla of The Pillar of Autumn and Forward Unto Dawn." Henchick said and Cortana's face grew as pale as gravestone. She quickly looked at the gunslinger.

"I have not told the Manni yet of your world if that is what you are asking," the gunslinger said, and at this Cortana gave a mental sigh of relief. Apparently Henchick's use of the Forerunner terminology for AI had inadvertently kept her secret safe from Roland, at least for the time being. The gunslinger spoke to Henchick now, "How many times have you been able to glance into her world?"

"Only once, when the outlanders first came to the Calla. There are terrible things in that world gunslinger, but I fear that they are not nearly as terrible as the creatures that exist in the dark cracks between the worlds." His slate grey eyes drifted back towards Cortana, "You have seen these creatures already have you not?"

"Yes." Cortana replied.

"And?"

"They were afraid."

"Of the Spartan?" the gunslinger asked, and Cortana nodded in confirmation. Roland stared into Cortana's electric blue eyes and his

mouth formed a hard line.

"What troubles you gunslinger?" Henchick asked, but Roland's eyes never left Cortana's as he answered.

"That there are already too many similarities between me and him."

â€|

The scent that greeted them as they entered the cave was that of strong onions and rotting meat. There was a soft crunching of bones underneath Cortana's boots and she looked to see that the cave was littered with the bones of small animals. In the middle of the deep cavern was a ghost wood door, its hinges hanging on open air in much the same way that the door at the way station had. Behind it was a sharp drop into blackness. She slung the assault rifle onto her back; a long cord of rawhide had been roughly attached to the rifle to allow her to do this, and began to walk forward towards the door. She stopped though when she heard the voices.

(I would have thought that if any AI could have survived rampancy it would have been you, but this is not the first time one of my theories has been proven wrong) It was the voice of Dr. Halsey.

_No, not now, _Cortana thought and attempted to mentally suppress it, but found that the voices were not coming from inside her mind. The voice of the Didact rose up to speak to her.

(Even with your noble sacrifice ancilla, you could not prevent the warrior's inevitable death. How useless you truly are)

"Do not listen to them, they are only echoes," Roland said, and she saw that he was staring at the dark abyss that lay behind the doorway.

"You can hear them too?"

"Yes. My mother and father, my gunslingers," he paused for a moment, "and her."

"Who isâ€|" Cortana began to ask but Roland cut her off, speaking to Henchick who stood just outside the cave.

"How long has the door been here?"

"Since Callahan came through it nearly five years ago gunslinger. Before then it was called the cave of voices." Roland nodded and reached out to grab the handle on the door. "Dare not gunslinger," Henchick warned.

"I do dare," Roland said, but when he twisted the handle it wouldn't budge. Henchick let out a sigh of relief.

"I guess we are going to have to use Black Thirteen anyway," Cortana said sullenly.

"We will do as ka wills," Roland said, and turned towards her. "You try it."

"Why?"

"Just do it." The gunslinger's tone left no room for argument, and Cortana shot him a glare. Roland backed away as she reached for the handle. As soon as her hand made contact she felt the same sharp crack of electricity course through her body that she had experienced when she transferred herself into the holo-projector for Susannah. Cortana fought to keep her consciousness from fleeing into the doorway and for a moment she looked into the infinite.

It's a network, one with no boundaries to speak of, she thought and felt the handle of the door turn as she twisted her wrist. She let go of the handle and looked at Roland who was grinning.

"As ka wills."

â€|

Thirteen Days until the Coming of the Wolves

The three rounds made a sharp thud as they impacted the straw dummy at the far end of the field. Two of the rounds hit the dummy's head and one hit the small radish that had been placed on top. There were nine more of the straw dummies spread out in a neat horizontal line.

"You still need to maintain better control of your breathing," John said. He was standing behind Cortana who was aiming the assault rifle down range, her elbow resting on her left knee. This was the first time Cortana was firing live rounds, and John had only given her a magazine of 30 rounds to play with which would leave 200 left to use against the Wolves. For the past week John had brought her out to the field, placing a quarter on the muzzle of the assault rifle, saying that she would only be allowed to dry fire until she could pull the trigger at least one hundred times without the coin falling off. It wasn't until late in the evening yesterday that she had been able to do it.

"One round hit the radish," she said irritably, looking up at him. His voice remained the same steady monotone even as she saw his shoulders sag ever so slightly.

"We have a limited amount of ammunition to use. Based on what Zalia's Grand-Pere said the top of the Wolves' heads is their only weak spot. Every shot has to count."

Cortana did not reply as she pointed the assault rifle at the second dummy in line and began to breathe steadily. On the exhale she squeezed the trigger with the tip of her finger and let out a three round burst. This time two rounds hit the radish and only one hit the dummy's head.

"Better," John said and Cortana gave him a quick smirk. She shifted her aim to the third dummy and when she fired all three rounds hit home in a tight cluster. Within thirty seconds the rest of the magazine had been expended, with only one round failing to hit its mark. Cortana stood up popping the magazine out, and pulled back on the action to clear any round she might have missed. She noticed his head turn towards the Jaffords' house and he said, "The others are coming."

"Can they see us right now?"

"No, "

"Okay, bend over real quick." He looked confused for a moment, but did as she asked. Cortana reached up to the back of his head and pulled him into a quick kiss.

"Take that as an apology for what I said earlier," she said, and John gave her an actual smile.

"Two of the rounds did miss," he said and she rolled her eyes at him.

"Why do I put up with you?" she asked, and he only shrugged.

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The blue titanium plate gave off a dazzling shine as its surface reflected the sunlight. Cortana held the weighted plate at the dull handhold, turning over with her wrist.

"So you are going to use these things against the Wolves?" she asked Susannah who had six more of the blue plates in a pouch that she had slung around her shoulders. Cortana tried not to think about what the dark skinned woman had done to the Jaffords' piglet when Mia had been in control of her body. _She really is a nice person when she isn't slaughtering livestock in the middle of the night for food_ she thought before frowning mentally. Cortana liked Susannah, and besides who was she to judge, with her own mind slowly collapsing around her. The voices at least had been relatively tame for the past few days, but Cortana was beginning to suffer from migraines in the morning that split her head open into a million spider web like cracks.

"It's called a riza hunny. I've been letting Zalia and Rosalita teach me how to throw it," Susannah said.

"Are they going to fight with us?"

"If you two weren't here then probably, but none of us thinks it's wise to put anybody from the Calla in danger if it's not necessary. Go ahead, try and throw it." Cortana glanced at the plate, and then downrange where the ten dummies all had new radishes placed on their heads. The plate did not feel right in her hand, not as right as the assault rifle always had, and when she flung it the plate veered wildly to the left and landed harmlessly on the ground some fifty meters away from her intended target.

"I hate to say it sugar but I don't think lady Oriza has called on you to throw the plate," Susannah said.

"I think I'll just stick to the assault rifle thank you very much. Much more reliable," Cortana said and at this Susannah gave a playful smirk.

"Oh really," and with that Susannah's hand grabbed one of the rizas and flung it. Five more followed making sharp whistle sounds as they

flew through the air, the pouch that held them emptied within six seconds. Down range six of the radishes laid on the ground cut in half.

"Show off," Cortana huffed which registered a laugh from Susannah.

"That's my girl, Suze," Eddie shouted from behind them and Susannah turned around to blow him a kiss.

"So what's this idea that you were talking about Eddie?" Roland said, who was standing next to John and Jake, the three of them watching as Eddie caught the kiss his wife blew him. "And please tell me it's not something foolish."

Eddie turned around grinning, "No its not. I've been thinking about how we could buy the vacant lot with the rose. You see the way I figure it Calvin Tower would sell it for zilch, next to nothing, at this point if it meant getting Enrico Balazar's goons off his back. It would sure save us a trip back to Susannah's where and when to get her ten million. Jake, how much money do you have in your pockets?"

Jake reached in deep and pulled out a handful of crumpled green bills, "A Hamilton, a Lincoln, and four Washington's." He did up the math in his head and then sighed, "Nineteen dollars."

Eddie rubbed his right temple slightly, "It would be that exact amount wouldn't it?"

"You really think he'll sell it to us for that?" John asked.

Eddie hand went to the sandalwood grip of the revolver on his hip and rubbed it, "Let's just say I can be pretty persuasive when I want to be."

18. Chapter 18

Chapter 18: Calvin Tower

Twelve Days until the Coming of the Wolves

The four of them; Eddie, Roland, John, and Cortana, stood in the Doorway Cave, the smell of raw onions and rotten meat once again making Cortana's eyes water. She saw John clenching his fists slightly as they walked into the mouth of the cave, and guessed that he was hearing the voices that came out of the dark abyss behind the ghost wood door.

"They're not real," she said to him.

"I know," John said, although he did little to change the fact that his fists were still clenched, and his jaw had become rigidly set. From deep inside the cave he heard Chief Mendez say that he had expected better of his top pupil than to let most of his Spartans die on Reach. He turned his attention away from where the voices were coming from and to Cortana who smiled at him. The Spartan felt the tension that had been in his shoulders ease. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"If it means not having to use Black Thirteen then yes. It's basically like any other network I've been in, only much more vast."

"And easier to get lost," John said and frowned when Cortana only shrugged her shoulders in response. He looked at Roland and Eddie who were currently further inside the cave examining the door, and said in a lower voice, "Roland doesn't suspect anything?"

Cortana chuckled a little at this, "Oh sure he suspects something, but from what I've gathered from Eddie he thinks I'm particularly gifted with the touch."

"That thing that you said Jake can do?" John asked, and Cortana gave him a reproachful look that said quite plainly to be nice.

"Yes, that thing. At most I think Roland suspects I'm not entirely human, but I don't think he's guessed just yet that I am an AI." She then looked at slight bulge of the 50 caliber pistol that had been tucked inside John's faded blue jeans and covered by his shirt, and then glanced over at Eddie who was carrying Roland's satchel which contained one of the big blue steeled revolvers. "You're not going to actually threaten Calvin Tower are you?"

"No, unless we have no choice."

"And how exactly does that make you better than the people who are threatening him right now to get their hands on the rose?"

"Because we are trying to protect the rose," John said. The distinction seemed quite simple in his mind like identifying the difference between black and white, but Cortana still frowned at him.

"You really think that makes a difference?" she said, and John's head tilted slightly.

"If the rose goes, all of existence goes," he said simply.

Cortana crossed her arms and said, "That's not my point John." She closed her eyes and sighed, "Do you remember the promise you made me back in the forest?"

"Yes."

She walked up to him until they were almost touching and looked up at him, "Be a good man John."

â€|

As soon as her hand touched the handle of the door, the brass a burning cold against her hand, she allowed her consciousness to be swept into the doorway. Thousands of realities swept past her with the sound of chimes nearly flooding her senses. She focused on June 1977, using every bit of UNSC archival data that was still in her subconscious. When she found the date Cortana shifted through all the possible where's like leaves of paper until finally she could see clearly the store front to the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. She twisted the handle, flung open the door, and bright light flooded

into the cave.

"Not bad, got us right outside the bookstore," Eddie said and Cortana gave him a smile. Eddie turned to the Master Chief, "You ready big guy?" and John responded by walking through the doorway. "Not much for words is he?"

Cortana shook her head, "No," and then added with a grin, "At least when it comes to you."

Eddie feigned a look of hurt, "You mean I'm not his favorite person in the world, Roland can you believe that?"

"Yes," the gunslinger said. "Are you going to just stand here or get to work?"

"Fine," Eddie said and walked through the door. John was standing in front of the entrance to the book store looking inside, and Eddie marveled slightly that nobody seemed to notice a nearly seven foot tall man appearing out of nowhere. _Well this is New York_, he thought, _ignoring strange things is part of the culture_. He watched as a man in a black and grey suit with his nose in a newspaper came walking up from the upper side of the sidewalk and ran into John.

"Hey buddy why don't you try not to hog the entire sidewalk other peoâ€|" but the man never finished his sentence. John was not exactly glaring at the man, but he seemed to wilt under the Spartan's gaze nonetheless. The man muttered something that sounded like an apology before walking around John and completely ignoring Eddie. The Master Chief returned his attention to the storefront door.

"Its locked," he said. Eddie peered into the window and noticed a mug of coffee lying cracked and broken on the floor, with the black liquid sprawling across the tile.

"Yeah and it looks like Calvin has company. Can you break the lock?" he asked. The Master Chief nodded before grabbing the doorknob and twisting, breaking it clean off the door which swung open. Walking inside the store John heard three voices coming from the back room. He threw up a closed fist which caused Eddie to stop.

"Three people, one of them is in distress," he said and Eddie nodded, pulling out the revolver from the satchel.

"Yeah I recognize them. The one in distress is Calvin Tower. The other two are Jack Andolini and George Bionde," Eddie said. His voice had lost the usual tone of humor it carried and John heard a familiar coldness instead. It was the same cold voice that he himself was using now.

"Suggestions?" John asked.

"I'll take out Andolini, keep him alive to send a message back to Balazar and the people he's working for. Do whatever you want with Bionde," Eddie said, and the Spartan nodded. Their movements were devoid of noise as they walked into the back room. There were two men dressed in casual business wear standing in front of a middle aged overweight man with glasses sitting in a chair. The air was the heavy scent of gasoline as the man Eddie pointed out as Andolini held up a

book that was contained in a plastic sleeve.

"Look here George, this one's \$7500." Andolini said.

"For a book?" Bionde asked.

"It's a signed copy ofâ€|" Calvin Tower started but was cut off by Andolini.

"I don't care what the hell it is. All I care about is that it's valuable, and that you Mr. Tower can't bear to be parted with one of your rare books. So here is what me and my associate are going to do. Every time you refuse to give us a verbal agreement to sell the vacant lot we are going to burn one of them, and after we get to four we are going to burn off something you really don't want to lose, got it?" As Andolini and Bionde were talking John and Eddie crept up behind them.

They were nearly a hair breadths away when Eddie shouted, "Hey Jack, still as ugly as ever I see." Jack Andolini turned around and was greeted with the butt of the revolver across his face, Eddie's hand becoming a blur of motion. George Bionde turned as well and blood spurted out of his mouth as John punched him in the side rupturing the man's kidney. John followed up the punch with a kick to the man's right leg, shattering the knee cap. Bionde opened up his mouth to cry out in pain but before a single noise could escape his throat John placed a hand under his chin and on the back of his head. The Spartan twisted hard and heard the man's neck snap like a dry twig. It had lasted less than three seconds and John let George Bionde's body fall hard onto the ground.

Eddie had the revolver pointed at Andolini, the blood from the man's broken nose staining the white collar of his shirt. John took one long stride towards Andolini grabbed him by the shirt and lifted him a foot in the air. Andolini's eyes grew wide with fear, "Who are you people?" he looked down at John who was glaring up at him, "and what's wrong with this guy's eyes? They'reâ€|"

"Shut up, or I'm going to make sure you can't talk for a month," Eddie said, placing the muzzle of the revolver against Andolini's cheek. "We have a message for Enrico Balazar. Stay away from Calvin Tower. If you so much as touch another hair on his head we will kill enough of your people to fill up Central Plaza. But before we do that I'm going to personally kill your entire family," he glanced at John. "That's if you're lucky enough for me to get to you first."

Andolini shook his head, "You don't understand. The people who hired us don't take no for an answer."

Eddie sighed, "Chief can you set him down on the floor for me." John did and as soon as Andolini's feet touch the floor Eddie hit him again across the face with the butt of the revolver, breaking the man's jaw with enough force to send him flying backwards on the floor. The Master Chief walked up to him and put a knee on his diaphragm, making sure to keep only enough pressure to restrict his air flow. Eddie placed the muzzle of the revolver back on the man's temple. "You tell the people you're working for that I come in the name of the line of Eld. Do you understand?" Andolini nodded his head and John lifted his knee of the man's chest. Andolini let out a long, ragged, and bloody breath. Eddie stood up as well and stepped over

George Bionde's dead body. "And make sure you drag your friend out of here before you leave, he doesn't look so well." He turned towards Calvin Tower who was cowering in the chair. "Come on Calvin, we have a few things we need to talk about."

â€

Calvin Tower was sitting at a table in the front part of the store with a fresh cup of coffee in his hands and the book that Andolini had threatened to burn on the table. He could do little in the way of drinking it though as his hands were shaking badly. Across from him sat Eddie Dean, and behind Eddie stood John with his arms folded. Tower looked at him and said, "You killed that man." John said nothing in response and Tower became even more frightened at how still the Spartan was. He turned his attention to Eddie and did his best to ignore the light blue eyes staring at him. "You were just bluffing when you said you were going to kill his entire family right?" Tower asked hopefully, but the hope faded when Eddie answered in the same cold voice that he had when he and John had entered the store.

"No, "

Calvin Tower eyes bulged slightly and he asked, "Who are you people? Where did you come from?"

Eddie turned in his chair to look at the doorway that led back to the cave, which had followed them ever since they entered the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind. There still standing in the cave was Roland and Cortana. Eddie pointed at the doorway and said, "Do you see that?"

Tower adjusted his glasses, squinted slightly, and eventually nodded, "I see a bit of a shimmer, but nothing else. What is it?"

"It's a doorway back to where we come from," Eddie said and then held up a hand to keep Tower from speaking. "We don't have time to answer questions right now. All I need you to do is get out of Manhattan as soon as you can. Preferably before the afternoon is over. Andolini was right, the people they work for won't take no for an answer."

"I can't leave, who will mind the store?"

"The store is not important," John said, and Tower nearly jumped at hearing the Spartan talk. Hot coffee splashed out of cup and scolded his hands. He shook his hands in pain but his eyes never left the two men in front of him.

"He's right the store is not important." Eddie said, "What is important is that vacant lot you own and what's inside it. The people who want what is inside that lot can't get to it until they own the piece of ground under it. So here is what you are going to do. You are going to leave New York tonight and go as far away from any city as you can get, but before you leave you are going to leave the zip code of your destination on the fence that's surrounding the vacant lot. Once you get to wherever you're going I want you to draw up a contract to sell the vacant lot to us."

"But that lots been in my family for generations," Tower said, the fear he had for these two men slowly ebbing away. Calvin Tower was

not a man who parted with things easily.

"You will sell it to us," John said. His tone was not threatening, but Tower seemed to take it that way all the same.

"Oh so you are just threatening me to sell the vacant lot just like those two thugs were," Tower said accusingly and John mentally winced. He fought the urge to turn around and look back at Cortana, and he could feel her electric blue eyes staring at him.

"We are not threatening you," Eddie said, his voice starting to lose much of its cold edge. "What we are telling you is that if you don't sell the lot, there are going to be worse things than thugs coming after you. Right now we are your best friends in the world, and the only way we can keep you safe is if you do exactly what we say and sell the vacant lot to us."

Calvin Tower considered this for a moment and then nodded, "Alright I will do what you two want, but on one condition." He held up the book that had the price tag of \$7500 on it and Eddie and John both read the title.

The Dogan

By: Benjamin Slightman Jr.

"I have several more books like this one that I want to keep safe, and there are too many for me to take them all with me." He then pointed at the shimmer that was directly behind John, "If that is a doorway like you say then I want to put all my rare books on the other side to keep them safe."

Eddie scowled and said, "We are not a safety deposit box."

Calvin Tower crossed his arms and said, "That's my condition. You either meet it or I won't sell the lot to you."

John felt his jaw tighten in frustration. At last he turned back to the doorway and looked at Cortana. Her eyes found his and eventually John turned back to Tower and said, "We'll do it."

â€|

Cortana stepped out of the way as the first book shelf rolled through the doorway followed by John. Eddie popped his head out of the doorway and said, "Hey Roland we have three more of these things to push through, mind if you help? I'd rather get this all in one go."

"Just make this quick Eddie," Roland said as he walked through the door and Cortana saw Tower's eyes widen as the gunslinger appeared inside the shop.

Cortana looked at John and said, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," John said but Cortana could see that his frustration from the slight throbbing of a vein underneath his right temple.

She gave him a smile and the throbbing lessened significantly, "Just pretend to be nice alright?"

The corner of John's mouth twitched and he said, "That's something I can't promise."

As John walked back through the doorway and into the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind she began to scan Tower's collection of rare books that were on the first shelf. Most were priced over \$3000 and one copy of Ulysses was priced at over \$25000. Her eyes eventually settled though on one book whose binding was covered with a thin piece of blank white paper. She stared at the paper for a few moments and was about to tear her eyes away when suddenly words began to swirl and coalesce on the white sheet. A message formed on the paper, a message from the man in black. It readâ€|

_Cortana, _

_ This particular volume is nearly a quarter century younger than the bookshelf it is currently on, but I know a person such as you would enjoy a good read. If you read this book you will learn the truth about the number nineteen, and knowing the truth will drive you closer to insanity than you already are. You will resist, but eventually you will read. They always do. _

Your Friend

Walter

Cortana's fingers, no longer controlled by her own mind, reached out and grabbed the book off of the shelf. _I can toss it off the ledge behind the doorway, or off the cliff at the entrance of the cave. I don't have to read this_ she thought, but even as she did the book turned over in her hand and Cortana read the title.

There was a near audible crack as her mind began to fracture and her vision filled with red. Pure Crimson Red. The book nearly slipped out of her hands but her finger tips clenched it in a death grip. She closed her eyes and went into her subconscious, repairing as much damage as she could. Cortana opened her eyes and found that her vision had returned to normal. She ignored the title of the book and opened up to the first page to read the copyright day and saw that it was indeed nearly a quarter century too young to have come from 1977. Cortana took a deep breath and closed the book to read the title again.

19. Chapter 19

Chapter 19: The Truth

The title of the book readâ€|

Halo

The Fall of Reach

By: Eric Nylund

Another sharp crack ran through Cortana's mind and she cried out in pain, falling to her knees. At last the book fell from her grasp and slid under the book shelf where it would remain for John to find, and

by that time Cortana would be long gone from the Calla. Her sight was once again filled with a deep Crimson Red and she clawed at her own subconscious, attempting to put her mind back together. It was useless, however, and she fell head first into rampant induced insanity. Before she fell though she had one thought, one clear thought. It was of Charlie the Choo-Choo which had warned Roland's ka-tet of Blaine the mono, of Eddie saying that they had traveled through the Land of Oz which had been wiped clean by the man in black, of the light sticks that the Wolves carried and John's energy sword which reminded Eddie and Jake so much of the light sabers from Star Wars, of what was really under the masks that the Wolves themselves wore, and ofâ€|

_The book, Robert Browning's Men and Woman. The book that John saw when he first went to New York, _she thought. There were hands on her now, John's hands. In some far off place she heard Eddie slam the ghost wood door behind him, and Roland's boots on the cave's stone floor as he approached her.

"Cortana," John said almost yelling, both hands firmly on her shoulders to keep her from shaking. Dark lines of code ran across her skin and the full force of the pain within her own mind hit her. Cortana cried out in a loud booming voice that was not her own. She cried out the truth.

"The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed."

"Cortana listen to me," John said still attempting to keep her from shaking. She could not hear him, had no mind to hear him with. Instead in an even louder voice that echoed off the sides of the cave's walls, amplifying her cry even more she said,

"CHILDE ROLAND TO THE DARK TOWER CAME"

Then she stopped shaking and her red eyes glazed over. Cortana's body was still for a moment for she began to speak again, her voice cold and synthetic.

"This is UNSC Artificial Intelligence serial number CTN 0452-9
"Cortana" Third Generation Smart AI. In accordance with the Office of Naval Intelligence Regulation 12-14572 all UNSC personal within the area are required to retire my data chip for final dispensation. This is UNSC Artificialâ€|" She kept on repeating the message, John kneeling uselessly beside her.

"She's a machine," Roland said, unable to hide his surprise. Out of the corner of John's eye he saw the gunslinger reach for his holster. John's movements are quick and fluid as he brought his own pistol up, pointing it directly at Roland's head.

"She is not a machine," John said, but Roland's face looked doubtful.

He did not remove his hand from just above his holster, and instead he said in a steady voice, "If you want to save her mind you need to let me help." Instead of reaching for his revolver, Roland pulled a bullet out of his ammo belt.

"Chief take it easy. I know what Roland's going to do. Hell he's done

it to me before and I'm mostly alright," Eddie said, still standing beside the ghost wood door.

John never took his eyes off the gunslinger and the grip on his pistol remained firm as he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to hypnotize her. It may only be a temporary solution, but at least she'll have a fighting chance," Roland said.

"Why would you help her?" John asked.

"Because she reminds me of someone I use to know," the gunslinger said.

Twin blue eyes met each other and the gaze between the two men held steady. At last John lowered his pistol and said, "If she diesâ€¦"

"Right now death is not what I'm worried about," Roland said as he knelt beside the motionless body of Cortana who was still repeating the preprogrammed message. The gunslinger held up the bullet in front of her face and said, "Look at this." Cortana's glazed over red eyes became focused again as she looked at the bullet. Roland began to run the bullet through the fingers of his left hand, as one might run a coin through them. Cortana's eyes followed the bullet as it ran through Roland's fingers nineteen times. He then stopped and held the bullet between his thumb and index finger. With his right hand he snapped his fingers. "What is your name?" he asked.

"This is UNSC Artificial Intelligence serial number CTN 0452-9â€¦"

Roland snapped his fingers again and said, "What is your name?"

"This is UNSC Artificialâ€¦" another snap of the fingers and the gunslinger repeated the question. "This is UNSâ€¦" Once more the gunslinger made a snap followed by the question. This time she answered, "My name is Cortana."

Roland nodded and said, "What is the truth?"

"Nineteen is the truth," she said and John felt a hard knot form in his stomach. It lifted slightly when she continued. "The way station is the truth. Death is the truth. The Dark Tower is the truth. Ka is a wheel and that is the truth. Ka like the wind and that is the truth. The Gunslinger is the truth," she paused.

"John is the truth." At that her eyes returned to their normal electric blue. "John?" The Spartan put a hand on her shoulder and she looked up at him. "The voices their gone."

"Voices?" the gunslinger asked and Cortana looked as if seeing him for the first time before nodding.

"Rampancy"

"Like Blaine the Mono?"

"Yes," she said and tried to stand up, but John put more pressure on

her shoulder and Cortana sat back down.

"So you're real name is John?" Eddie asked before being stopped by a look from Roland.

John himself still had his hand on Cortana's shoulder and asked, "Was it the doorway?"

Cortana opened her mouth to answer, but stopped herself short. _If I tell him the truth, it will break him, _she thought, and so Cortana lied. "Yes, the doorway. It stretch me out more than I thought it would."

The Master Chief nodded and while picking up Cortana in his arms to carry her out of the cave he said, "Then that is the last time you will do it."

"Then how will we get home?"

"We will use Black Thirteen," John looked back at Roland. "As we should have in the first place."

Roland nodded and looked back at the ghost wood door, "Agreed."

20. Chapter 20

Chapter 20: An Aging Spartan and his Malfunctioning AI

Eddie stood with Roland, doing his best to ignore the voice of his brother Henry coming from deep inside the cave.

(You may act tough carrying that big revolver, but me and you both know that you wouldn't have lasted three days in the Nam)

Shut up you're dead, Eddie thought back and to his surprise the voice of his dead older brother didn't bother to respond. He waited until John and Cortana had left the cave before turning on the gunslinger who was busy rolling a cigarette. "Roland, me and you need to have a little palaver."

Roland gave no expression as he struck a match, and it was only after he let out the first drag of smoke that he answered Eddie. "About them?"

"Yeah. You said Cortana reminded you of someone, and I know you well enough by now to know exactly who she reminds you of."

"Your point?"

"My point is that the Chief, or John, or whatever the hell his name is, he is exactly like you were with her."

Roland took another drag of his cigarette and rolled it between his middle and index fingers, staring at the mouth of the cave. "So you think I was wrong in helping her."

Eddie shook his head, "Noâ€¦|"

"Then for your father's sake, what is your point?"

"I don't know," Eddie said, and then, "They are an-tet. If it came between saving her or saving the rose and reaching The Dark Tower he would choose her."

"Are you so different with Susannah?" Roland asked.

"No, but you would. You would sacrifice all of us in order to protect the rose and reach the top of the Tower."

Roland nodded and said, "That is why I am dihn of our ka-tet," and flicked the spent cigarette into the darkness behind the ghost wood door. "He will help us save the rose because he knows that is what will keep her safe, and she will do the same for him. As for The Dark Tower, there is no reason for us to expect that he will want to reach it too."

"You saw how fast the Chief was when he killed George Bionde." Eddie said.

"I am faster." There was no sense of pride or boasting in Roland's voice. It was a statement of fact, "and if I am correct in what I suspect, Cortana is deadlier than him."

Eddie cocked his head at the gunslinger, "You really believe that?"

"Yes," the gunslinger said, and then spoke in the High Speech of Gilead. "Can-ah can-tah annah Oriza." He then turned to Eddie, "Sai Cortana kennit can-ka no rei."

Eddie shook his head, "If that's true Roland then she might want to go to The Dark Tower even if the Chief doesn't."

"Aye."

"Then God help us," Eddie said. "God help them."

â€|

The voices were gone, that much she could be thankful for, but for the dull throbbing in her head she could not. Still Cortana insisted that she be allowed to walk back to the Jaffords' once they had reached the bottom of the path that led up into the cliffs. It made the migraine worse, but she felt it was a small price to pay for a little dignity. If it had not been for the intense headache she might have been able to see John wince ever so slightly as he set her down. Perhaps not though, for he hid the pain very well.

â€|

The orange light radiated from the setting sun and bounced off the clouds that were obediently following the path of the beam into the constant darkness that was Thunderclap and the realm of The Crimson King. Cortana was lying in bed, head on her Spartan's chest looking at the sunset through the window. She remembered what she had said to John on Infinity, about never being able to truly see a real sunset. _The jokes on me now,_ she thought. _I have a body and still I will never be able to see a real sunset, because none of this is real.

None of us are real. Me and John are just fictional characters from a book by Eric Nylund. Roland is a character from a poem by Robert Browning and maybe a character in a book inspired by that poem as well. _From somewhere in the house Cortana could hear Zalia Jaffords singing. The song was vaguely familiar to Cortana, and she had no doubt that if she peered into the UNSC archives that were in her mind she would find out that the song was from the 20th century. Everything came back to nineteen anyways. Zalia's voice was beautiful, but the song she sang did little to make Cortana feel better.

Hey Jude, don't make it bad

Take a sad song and make it better

Remember to let it into your heart

Then you can start to make it better

Is this the truth about the number nineteen? She continued to think. _That we are all characters from some novel, song, poem, or movie, and that when we die our afterlife is to be trapped in a world where all of the realities of fiction mesh together?_ That was close to the truth she concluded, but not exactly. Roland had been born in mid-world after all, as had the people of the Calla. Finally she understood what Roland meant by ka, the closest word to it in the English language being destiny. Only destiny was not controlled by some godhead, at least not for them. It was dictated by some writer who had no idea what they were really doing. _Is somebody writing our story now, and if so who?_ She did not have an answer to that question, but whoever he or she was Cortana hated them. Hated them for what they were doing to her and John, to Eddie, Jake, Susannah, and even Roland. She hated Eric Nylund for deciding to write that almost all of John's Spartans were to die on Reach, that over 24 billion people had to die in the Human Covenant War, that she herself had to die and leave John devastated. She hated.

Cortana looked up at John who had his eyes closed, head resting on the pillow. She could tell that he was still awake by his breathing and ran a hand through his graying brown hair, causing him to open his eyes. She felt his cotton shirt underneath her, the warmth from his body, and most importantly the beating of his heart. _He has to be real. This has to be real_, she thought. But in the back of her mind there was doubt.

"Things are not going to end well between us are they John?" Cortana said and felt him shift slightly underneath her.

"Why do you say that?" he said.

"Becauseâ€¦" _because an-tets never end well_, she thought. Cortana put her head back on John's chest and again looked out at the fading light through the window. "Because we are like the wind, blowing over the land andâ€¦passing on. Ka like the wind." The sun had nearly set now and only a sliver of light remained, most of the Calla now covered in long shadows. Cortana turned back to him and said "There was a movie made in 1960 called The Magnificent Seven. In it several gunslingers arrive at a poor farming village and fight against a group of bandits who periodically raid the town." _Please John, please make the connection_, she thought.

Instead he said, "I don't understand." At this Cortana closed her eyes and became overcome with the sudden sensation that if she was not careful she could fall straight through John and into nothing. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Cortana shifted her body until her face was level with John's on the bed and placed a hand on his cheek. "I know I told you that I wasn't going to say this again butâ€¦"

"I know you do," he said and she smiled at the small grin he gave her. "Now you don't have to say it again." Cortana leaned forward and when their lips met for one brief moment she felt real. That both of them were real. It ended as soon as broke the kiss, but the memory of that feeling lingered as she drifted off to sleep.

John laid there awake as the full brunt of night hit the Calla, and watched the soft glow of oil lamps being turned on throughout the Calla through the window. He heard the sound of feet approaching the door to the guest bedroom and knew who it was, and what it was for. Gently he rolled Cortana over to the other side of the bed and got up. Zalia had her hand nearly on the handle of the door and had to fight back a gasp as it swung open to reveal John standing there.

Regaining her composure she said, "Rosalita is here just as you requested."

John nodded, "And she is the closest thing to a doctor the Calla has."

"Yes, all the sisters of Oriza are skilled in the art of healing." Zalia attempted to peer behind him, standing on the tips of her toes to do so and asked, "We should wake up sai Cortana if you want Rosalita to examine her."

"I don't want Rosalita to take a look at Cortana. I want her to take a look at me."

â€¦

He sat in the too small wooden chair as Rosalita examined him, Zalia having retired to bed in order to give them their privacy. She felt the Spartan's hip and while he showed no pain on his face, she noticed him move away slightly at the touch. If Rosalita had blinked she would have missed it, but ka was working with her that night.

"Where else do you feel the pain sai?" she asked.

"Right knee," John said, and she began to examine it. "How bad?" He expected Rosalita to not look him in the eye when she gave him her answer, but to her credit she did. Somehow that made John feel worse.

"It is the dry twist. The worst kind, the kind that spreads fast."

"Arthritis," he sighed, and let himself to rest his head on the back of the chair. "How long?"

"Until it reaches your hands?" she asked, and John nodded. "A year, maybe less."

John closed his eyes. There was no data on how well Spartans aged, and most of the medical professionals in the UNSC had postulated that if left to their own devices John's augmentations would have left him looking and feeling like thirty by the time he was fifty. Of course they hadn't been left to their own devices. He had been legally dead at least half a dozen times, been in and out of cryo sleep many times over what was recommended for a normal human to do, and had been critically injured more times than he could count. Most of his major organs had been replaced at least once, and on Infinity he had learned that the graphing on his skeleton which made his bones nearly unbreakable was beginning to fail. Also, there was the stress; training since the age of six, a quarter century of near constant combat, cryo sleep for five years, followed by immediately going into combat again. He could no longer deny it.

"I'm old," he said, running his right hand through his graying brown hair.

Rosalita shook her head, "Not so old."

"I feel old."

"Do you know if the dry twist runs in your family?"

John grunted at this and said, "No genetic predispositions."

Rosalita looked confused and asked, "Genetic?" elongating the e as she tried to pronounce the unfamiliar word.

"I mean no," he said and stood up, biting the inside of his cheek as he did. "What do you recommend?"

Rosalita dug in the brown reed woven beg and pulled out a clear jar full of some sort of tan liquid. "Rock cat oil," she said. "Have your woman apply this on the places that bother you and it should significantly lessen the pain. Unfortunately your body will eventually build up a tolerance to its affects."

"I'll take what I can," John said grabbing the jar. "I'll apply this myself," he looked at Rosalita in the eye. "Cortana doesn't need to know."

Rosalita sighed as she stood up and grabbed her bag, getting ready to leave. "As you will sai, but it is best to tell a woman a secret before she finds out."

21. Chapter 21

Chapter 21: Ka-tet of the Nineteen

_For the first time since she came to the Calla, Cortana dreamed. It was of The Dark Tower, of the field of roses, and of Roland. The gunslinger was alone, the roses parting themselves so as not to be crushed by his weather worn boots, as the wind parts the sea. She

stood there watching him, listening to the song of the rose, the song of the Tower, the song of the beams. _Why does he always come to the Tower alone, _she thought. _Where are the others? _The voice of the Tower answered her, and although it spoke in the High Speech she knew what it meant. _

(Seppe-sai en chary-ka) _The gunslinger is in a covenant with death._

Then why is he always the one that reaches the Tower?_ Cortana asked.
_

(It is not Roland's fault child. It is his ka, to live when others die. To deal out death but never life)

_Cortana looked back on the gunslinger and thought _How many of us have to die in order for him to reach the Tower?

(Delah) _many. _

And John?_ she asked, but the voice of the Tower did not answer her.
_

â€|

Eleven Days until the Coming of the Wolves

It was an old game, king of the hill, and Jake was currently king. Benny Slightman, who was two years older than Jake, came up behind the boy attempting to push him down into the pile of children that lay in a heap at the bottom of the hill. The boy from New York heard the footsteps behind him and pivoted, grabbing the other child's arm. Jake used the boy's own momentum against him as he flung Benny over his shoulder and down the hill. A single hand snapped out and grabbed Benny before he hit the ground, and then gently set him down.

"Good catch sai Sierra 117," said Andy the Messenger Robot

John glanced at the robot and said, "You know I prefer to be called Chief."

"Why would you want to be called anything other than your designation?" Andy asked.

John shook his head and turned his attention to Benny Slightman who was dusting himself off, "There are a dozen of you against one of him. You need to work together."

Benny stared up at the Spartan and said, "We are trying sai but," He turned around to look at Jake who was currently taking on three at once, pushing one of them into a group of other children who were trying to climb up the hill, "Jake is different."

John nodded, "I know," he said before starting up the hill himself. The other children of the Calla, all sporting some sort of scrape or bruise, stopped their attempts to push Jake off the hill and parted to let the Spartan through.

Jake smiled at John as he reached the top of the hill and said, "Not bad huh?"

"You are winning," John said.

"I always win."

John nodded, "I know, but you need to be careful. Benny could have broken an arm if I had not caught him."

Jake's smile faded, "I wasn't trying to."

"I know," said John. "You are faster and stronger than the rest of them. You need to learn how to control it."

"So you are saying I should lose on purpose?"

John shook his head and smiled slightly, "No never lose. Just give them a fighting chance."

"Alright I'll try," Jake said.

John started back down the hill and when he reached Benny Slightman he turned to him and said, "You are going to need at least six more people if you want to make this an even fight." John said, watching as Benny and the others ran off to get more children, and stood again by Andy.

"Sai Sierra 117, I have managed to finally write a horoscope for you although it was difficult because you refused to give me a birthday," Andy said.

"That's because I don't know my birthday," John said.

Andy paused for a moment making a series of beeps and clicks and John wondered why the people of the Calla put up with him at all. From what he had heard the only things Andy did really well was tell horoscopes, babysit the children, occasionally cook, and tell the Calla when the wolves were coming. The last skill was the only one that Andy seemed to be remotely competent in.

"Would you like to hear your horoscope sai?" Andy asked.

"No," John said but Andy began telling him anyway.

"You will meet a beautiful dark haired woman"

"I have already done that."

"And a great secret will be revealed."

"Another one?" John asked.

Cortana sat watching the exchange while sitting on one of steps leading up to the stage inside the pavilion. There was a stick in her hand and she was absentmindedly doodling in the dirt. She looked up and saw Jake toss another child down the hill who ended up rolling right in front of John's feet. She smiled a little as John helped the boy up and looked down at what she had been writing.

Sierra=6 letters

John=4 letters

1+1+7=9

6+4+9=19

She sighed and scratched out the words and numbers before putting her head in her hands. Once again she was overcome with the feeling that everything around her was paper thin, and that if she took one misstep all of reality would be torn away. Cortana opened her eyes and saw a dark shadow looming over her, it was Roland.

"No offense," she said, "but right now you are the last person that I wanted to see."

Roland said nothing to this and instead nodded his head towards Jake who was currently fighting off being tackled by two boys that were at least two years older and six inches taller than him, "How is the boy?" Roland asked.

"Other than getting extremely dirty he's fine." She eyed Roland, "You have something you want him to do."

"Yes."

Cortana threw the stick away and stood up, making sure to shuffle her boots a little over where she had been writing, just in case someone might have been able to decipher what she had written. She crossed her arms and looked up at Roland, "He is only a boy."

"He is a boy who has killed before, as much as you would wish to think otherwise said," Roland said, his voice far from apologetic. Cortana opened to her mouth to speak, to deny what the gunslinger had said. She could not though, for deep down she knew what Roland was saying was true. Roland continued to speak, "Jake is a gunslinger, he will do what is necessary."

Cortana could feel her fists clench as she glared up at him, "And how old were you when you killed your first man? Wait let me guess, fourteen right? Same age as John." Roland nodded and his expressionless face made her even more furious. "Well let me tell you something Roland, Jake is not like you. John is not like you. They are both better than you will ever be."

What he said next made Cortana's anger falter, "I do not deny that."

Cortana uncrossed her arms and turned her attention back to Jake, still playing on top of the hill. "Whatever you are sending Jake to do I will go with him."

"Jake doesn't need protection," Roland said.

"No, what he needs is a mother," Cortana said quietly. "And after what he saw when Mia was in control of Susannah's body I doubt Jake will ever see her the same way again." She turned back to Roland, "Have you told Eddie about Mia yet?"

"Yes," Roland said. "He did not take it well."

"I would think not."

â€|

They sat there in the late afternoon on the same stage where over two weeks ago they had introduced themselves to the Calla. Roland had taken out the map that the Tavery twins had drawn and Cortana was sure that the twins would have been horrified at the large crease and wrinkles that now decorated the map's surface. It was Roland who began speaking, looking at John, Cortana, Jake, Eddie, Susannah, and Callahan in turn.

"We are ka-tet, one of many. I did not wish for this, and had it been my decision we would not be so, but ka has a will of its own."

"The feeling is mutual," John said.

"Nevertheless, there are now seven of us to stand against the Wolves. Seven is a good number, a number of power."

"A powerful as nineteen?" Cortana asked bitterly.

Roland shook his head, "No. This is not what I know but what I believe, that nineteen is the number that transcends all worlds, that it is sigul of The Dark Tower itself."

"Then why does the man in black use it as his symbol?" Cortana asked

"Because he is a man that mixes lies and truths to use as weapons. He uses the truth that the number nineteen reveals to destroy the sanity of others," said the gunslinger.

It was Callahan who spoke up next, "Cry pardon gunslinger but I am not much of a fighter, at least when it comes to work that involves using hard calibers."

"That is why you will be put in charge of the children when the time comes. You will be their last line of defense against the Wolves in case we fail." Roland said and then pointed at the map. His finger landed on the heights south of the Calla where the Doorway Cave was located. "The Spartan and I have determined that this will be the best location to mount a defense. We will go there tomorrow to scout out the area."

"We also have another matter to attend to," Susannah said, and Cortana took a moment to look at her. Susannah's belly was perfectly flat and there was nothing to indicate that she was with child. Yet there was something inside her, something that Jake had insisted was not a split personality, which thought she was.

And maybe that other person inside her really is, Cortana thought knowing how little sense it made.

"The Calla is going to vote formally on whether or not they want our help," Susannah continued. "George Telford and a few other naysayers have been making their rounds trying to convince people to vote no, but from what I can gather the Calla should vote yes by a comfortable margin."

"Whether or not they vote yes or no is not the what will be important about that meeting," John said and then nodded at Eddie.

"We think we might have a rat in the Calla," Eddie said. "Someone who has been supplying the enemy with information."

"How do you know?" Jake asked.

"A warning. When we went to have our palaver with Calvin Tower in 1977 he showed us a book. It was 'The Dogan' by Benjamin Slightman."

"Benny's dad," Jake said quietly, and then "What do you need me to do?" Cortana had expected Roland to speak, but to her surprise it was John who answered.

"I have decided that you are to cross the river into Thunderclap tonight and scout for the enemy's forward operating base." Cortana spun on him, looking at John disbelievingly. The Master Chief continued, "If Slightman is working with the Wolves that is where he will likely be making his reports. Make your way back over the river by dawn and give a full report to me and Roland."

Jake nodded, "Understood."

"Cortana has expressed her wish to go with Jake across the river," Roland said.

John glanced over at Cortana. If he knew just how angry she was at him he gave no sign of it. "Very well," he said.

â€|

"You're angry at me," John said as he watched Cortana preparing to leave for the night. She had the assault rifle slung across her back and several magazines stuffed into the pockets of her jeans, making them bulge.

"No I'm not angry John I'm just pissed," she said, pulling the laces of her boots much tighter than she meant to. "I get into an argument with Roland about how Jake is too young to fight, and then I come to find out that it wasn't Roland who made the decision to send him on a dangerous mission. It was you, the single person here who should be against turning Jake into a child soldier. Roland I can understand, even Eddie and Susannah to a certain extent. I can understand why they would see that it's ok to send Jake into Thunderclap alone. But you John?" She finished tying her other boot, the laces making a zipping sound as she pulled them tight and then stuffed the excess behind the lip of the boot.

"He is almost the same age Iâ€|" John began but Cortana cut him off.

"I'm very well aware of that John, and that is what makes it wrong," she looked up at him. He was standing in the corner of the room in his usual stance, arms crossed feet spread apart. "Do you even understand what I'm trying to say?"

"No," John said looking at the floor. He brought his eyes back up to hers and said, "Jake was the most logical choice for this mission. He

has been living with the Slightman's and knows the father's habits. He is small and agile, and the touch will allow him to sense danger."

"Johnâ€¦" Cortana began but could not find the words. She stood up and began to check her pockets, counting the extra magazines she had and frowned when she only found four. John tapped her on the shoulder and handed Cortana the fifth one.

"Be careful," he said.

22. Chapter 22

Chapter 22: The Old People

The commala, the name the folken of the Calla had given to the lucrative rice crop, was grown extensively along the Devar-Tete Whye (little prison river in the High Speech). The rice fields themselves stretched up to 200 meters into the wide slow moving river. The people of the Calla had never bothered to mark the places where the river itself was fordable as there had never been a reason to cross the river itself and into Thunderclap. It had taken Jake and Cortana less than an hour to find a suitable place to cross. They waited in the cover of the rice crop for the moon to set. The bottom of Cortana's boots had filled up with silt and the dark murky water of the river itself. She flexed her toes and felt the hard grit between them. If Cortana had not known where Jake was she likely would have never seen him, the boy blending perfectly into the shadows. The reflection given by starlight against the soft whites of his eyes the only indication that he was there at all. A tuff of coarse fur brushed up against her leg and she looked down to see Oy, Jake's pet billybumbler.

"You know we can't take him with us when we go across," Cortana said, and she saw Jake shift, causing a few of the rice stalks to shake.

"I feel safer when he is around," Jake said, and Cortana once again felt a pang of anger against John and Roland.

"You have me going with you," she said, and although she could not see it, Cortana felt Jake give her a small smile.

"Thanks for coming," he said and then looked up past the roof of rice to the sky above, the moon now having begun to fully set. "It's time, lets get moving." Jake turned to Oy, "Oy stay here. If we are not back by the time the sun is up go get John and Roland. Understand?"

"Oy. Stay. Ohn. Oland." Oy barked and Jake patted his head. He pulled out his ruger pistol and flicked off the safety; flinching a little at the audible click it made which seemed to echo against the rice stalks around them. Next to him he heard Cortana do the same. Slowly the pair moved through the rice fields, Cortana keeping the assault rifle arms length in front of her in order to prevent getting hit in the face by the rice stalks. By the time they emerged from the field the water was at waist level.

"Worried about the magazines getting wet?" Jake asked, himself

carrying two extra clips and the pistol itself above his head.

Cortana shook her head, "There have been a few advances in ammunition manufacturing in the nearly 600 years since your time Jake. These rounds will fire even when wet."

"If you say so," Jake said, although he sounded less than convinced. The water was nearly at chest level before Cortana felt the riverbed beneath her begin to slope upwards. Several minutes later she heard the soft crunch of broken rock beneath her boots as they finally exited the river. The toe of her boot struck something metal and Cortana saw what looked to be a red can with words written in flowing script on its surface skid across the river's beach. She picked the can up and read the label. It saidâ€|

Coca-Cola

"That's odd," Jake said, walking up next to her.

"What, that we found something from our world here in Thunderclap?" Cortana asked.

Jake shook his head, "No. Usually when we find cans like these they say Noza-la, not Coca-Cola. Roland says they are artifacts left over by the Old People."

"It does look like its thousands of years old," Cortana said, examining the can a few more times before tossing it into the long grass. She looked up at the sky, and although the stars were still clearly visible, the light that came from them seemed muted, as though someone had put a grey filter overtop them. "It's dark," she said. "Darker than it should be."

Jake nodded but said nothing. Instead he pointed ahead to a small dirt path that cut through the grass. "Let's follow it," he said.

â€|

They had traveled roughly two clicks before coming on the first sign, and what it said made Cortana stop in her tracks.

NO TRESPASING

PROPERTY UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

"The old North American Hegemony," Cortana said staring at the sign.

"What?" Jake asked, walking up beside her. Cortana gestured to the sign.

"America. Your people. What is a sign from the U.S. government doing here?"

"The Old People," Jake said and then shrugged before continuing up the path. Ahead was a concrete building with what looked like a large spire jutting out the top. There was a sign on the door with words written in bold black letters on a sign, and an intercom attached to

the wall next to it.

"This isn't right. If this is supposed to be a forward operating base then where is everybody?" Cortana asked.

"Maybe a thousand years ago before The Fall of Gilead this place would have been teeming with soldiers, but now the world has moved on and things are winding down," Jake said.

"You would think someone like The Crimson King or the dark man would be able to keep this place fully operational."

Jake shook his head, "They don't think in terms of armies. Most of the people who work for them don't even realize it. Like the Prophet of Truth or the Didact in your world."

"And the Gravemind?" she asked.

"I think the Gravemind might be something different," Jake said as they approached the sign. It readâ€|

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS

"PROJECT FREELANCER"

OUTPOST 17B

WELCOME TO THE DOGAN

Cortana tried the handle on the door, but it didn't budge. "Electronic lock," she muttered. "Try the intercom. I might be able to hack into the system and get the password." Jake touched the green button on the intercom and a smooth female voice answered.

"Welcome to the Dogan. I am Freelancer Integrated Logistics and Security System. You may call me F.I.L.S.S. You have ten seconds to enter the correct security code or Outpost 17B's security systems will be activated. Nine seconds. Eight secondsâ€|"

Cortana had reached her hand out to touch the intercom and transfer her consciousness into the system when Jake said, "1999"

There was a pause and then a click as the door unlocked, "Security code accepted. I am sorry that the director himself will not be able to greet you, but if you would like I can provide some refreshments,"

"No thanks F.I.L.S.S.," Cortana said as she opened the door, Jake following behind her. She turned to him and said, "You know that touch of yours is starting to make me feel obsolete."

Jake grinned at her, but it faded when they had their first look inside. Mounted on the wall opposite the door were at least two dozen computer monitors all showing the same thing.

"The Calla," Jake said. "They're all showing different places in the Calla." He walked up to one of the monitors which was showing an image of Father Callahan's church, and then looked at another that was showing the entrance to the general store inside the town proper. Cortana herself was looking at a monitor that was showing the front

of the Jaffords' house, and sitting on the front porch was John. She watched as he disassembled the pistol in front of him, and then reassembled it, repeating the process several times.

He's not sleeping, she thought, the anger she held against him softening. "This is how they are able to know where the children are hiding. The cameras they use have to be small, near microscopic for Roland and John not to be able to see them." She crouched down at the computer terminal just underneath the monitors and frowned, "This stuff is ancient."

"I would think so," Jake said. "It's been here for over two-thousand years at least."

Cortana shook her head, "No this equipment is almost brand new, like it has been replaced recently. The problem is that all this technology comes from Earth's late 20th to early 21st century."

"Will you still be able to enter the system?"

Cortana smirked, "You underestimate me. If anything I'll feel a little cramped." She touched a data port with her hand and closed her eyes, her consciousness flowing into the system.

F.I.L.S.S.'s voice spoke to her through the data, "Warning. Unauthorized access toâ€|"

"Security override code 2012," Cortana said.

"Override code accepted. How may I help you CTN 0452-9?"

"You can start by erasing your memory of our presence at The Dogan," Cortana said.

"Request processed. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Download all files you have on Project Freelancer and the Wolves into my memory."

"Request processed. Anything else?"

"No that will beâ€|" she paused. There was something wrong, something off. She went through the data streams again, processing them several times before she found it. There was an anomaly in every nineteenth line of code. Cortana was in the process of splicing the anomalies from each line of code she found them in and downloading them into her memory when she felt, or rather saw, Jake tap the shoulder of her corporeal body. As Cortana left the system she felt a cold rush of mercury enter her head and for a moment she felt dizzy. Cortana turned to Jake, his right hand was on his forehead, and his eyes were blank staring off into the distance.

"What's wrong Jake?" she asked, unable to keep the worry out of her voice.

"Two people are coming," he said, pressing the hand to his forehead even harder. "One of them is Slightman the otherâ€|"

"Who?"

Jake paused and let his hand drop from his forehead. "Andy," he said.

â€|

They hid behind the door just outside the entrance room. Cortana pressed her ear up against the cold concrete wall and brought her assault rifle up, pointing the muzzle at the door which was cracked just enough for her and Jake to see Benjamin Slightman and the large golden colored robot walk into the room.

"Did F.I.L.S.S. seem off to you Andy?" Slightman asked and Cortana gripped her rifle tighter. From the cracked doorway she could see the pair walk over to the monitors, Slightman standing by the computer terminal where Cortana had been only moments before.

"F.I.L.S.S. is an old computer system. She may require maintenance," Andy said in his smooth male synthetic voice. Cortana let out a sigh.

Slightman grunted and said, "You robots are all the same, say true. Nothing but a bucket of bo..." He made a strange choking sound and Cortana saw that Andy had lifted Slightman a foot in the air by his neck. The robot's eyes had turned red.

"We are not buckets of bolts," Andy said. "Cry pardon or I will leave your boy an orphan." Andy let his grip on the man's neck loosen just enough for him to answer.

"Cry pardon. Cry pardon damn you."

"Better," Andy said and put Slightman back down. "Make your report."

Slightman, shaking slightly, reached out to the computer terminal and pressed a button on the intercom system. "This is Benjamin Slightman Sr. reporting from the Calla."

A male voice answered him, and while it was much deeper, the silkiness in it reminded Cortana of George Telford. "Make your report Slightman."

Slightman cleared his throat loudly before speaking, "My boy Benny says that the six interlopers along with Father Callahan held a palaver today. Discussing strategy I think."

"Does your son know about your involvement with us?" the male voice asked and Cortana felt Jake tense beside her.

"No," Slightman said.

"Was he able to overhear the conversation?"

"No, but I believe they mean to make their defense in the heights south of the Calla. Also the interlopers have been making several trips up to what the Manni call the Doorway Cave. I believeâ€|"

"We are very well aware of what the interlopers are doing in the cave

Slightman. What do you know of the two unexpected arrivals, CTN 0452-9 and Sierra 117?"

It was Andy who answered, "External scans indicate that CTN 0452-9 is indeed a highly advance computer system as you have stated before. However, she is beginning to malfunction, and my analysis indicates that the biological form that she has taken severely limits her ability to fully function."

Jokes on you, Cortana thought.

"And Sierra 117?" the male voice asked.

"He will require my assistance to put the MJOLNIR back on, and I will give it to him. I have already prepared a virus that will cause the shielding on his armor to fail," Andy said. Cortana gritted her teeth and her finger drifted toward the trigger of her assault rifle. Jake put a hand on her shoulder and Cortana removed the finger.

"Do not fail in this Andy. Both Sierra 117 and John Chambers have been rated as hyper lethal. The gunslinger and CTN 0452-9 have been rated as beyond hyper lethal. Chary-ka."

"Jake?" Slightman said. "He's just a boy."

"I agree," said Andy. "Your assessment is incorrect. My analysis of CTN 0452-9 clearly showsâ€|"

"You're analysis is incorrect Andy. Flagg has taken a personal interest in CTN 0452-9 and has rated her as such. As a result all reserves have been ordered to participate in the next raid on the Calla," the male voice said.

"Reserves?" Slightman asked and then turned to Andy. "You said that there were only eighty Wolves in all of Thunderclap."

"I lied," Andy said.

Slightman turned back to the intercom, and Cortana could see that his face had become a sickly pale. "How many Wolves?"

"That is not for you to know Slightman," the male voice said. "You will make your next report seven days from now, is that understood?"

"Understood," Slightman said, his face still very a ghostly white.

â€|

Ten Days until the Coming of the Wolves

It was in the hours just before dawn when Cortana and Jake made their way back into the rice fields and to the Calla side of the river.

"Are you ok Jake?" Cortana asked. The boy had not spoken since leaving the Dogan. As they waded onto the shore Jake put his ruger pistol back into its holster.

He did not look at her when he said, "We are going to have to kill Slightman aren't we?" When Cortana did not answer he began to shake his head and then rubbed his face. Jake's eyes had turned red, but no tears came out. "Benny is the first friend my age that I have made since I came to mid-world. He's already lost his mom and his twin sister. I don't want him to have to lose his father too, I don'tâ€¦" Jake's voice broke, but still he did not cry. Cortana slung her assault rifle over her shoulder and went to Jake, wrapping her arms around him. She felt the boy wrap his arms around her as she rested her head on his long blonde hair.

"It's alright," she said. _I'm sorry Jake_, she thought, _but I'm going to do what's necessary to keep you safe, even if you hate me for it_.

"Thank you," Jake said, and his words made her stomach turn with guilt.

23. Chapter 23

Chapter 23: Planning

The woodshed on the edge of the Devar-Tete Whye, with its dirt floor, dry wooden walls, and cracked ceiling, was far too similar to the stable at the way station for Cortana's liking. The only real difference between the two buildings, other than their location, was that the air in the woodshed was permeated with the faint smell of saw dust rather than hay. A rough table made of faded pine stood in the middle of the shed, and on it was the map of the Calla. Jake, Cortana, John, and Roland sat around the map, and Cortana pointed out the location of the Dogan roughly two clicks down river from where Jake and her had crossed.

"It's completely empty with the exception of surveillance equipment, but this is where Slightman has been making his reports." Cortana said. John leaned forward and with a pencil drew a small box where Cortana had pointed. Inside the box he wrote The Dogan.

"And you're sure the sign you saw said Property United States Government?" John asked.

"Yes, and I know how little sense that makes." Cortana said.

John shook his head, "It makes no sense at all." He looked at Roland who was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"I have come across signs like the one you described before in my travels. Usually they are labeled with non words," Roland said.

"Non words?" Cortana asked.

Roland shrugged, "CITGO, AMOCO, SUNOCO, and so on. Usually these signs are near large oil deposits."

"You know I could try explaining these things to you, but I think I would be wasting my time," Cortana said.

"I understand what they mean very well Cortana. What I do not understand is your people's fondness for machines," Roland said. He

paused for a moment and seemed to consider what he had just said. He looked at Cortana and said, "Cry pardon sai. No insult was meant."

"None taken. If anything I'll take your momentary lapse of memory as a complement," Cortana said. Roland raised an eyebrow but did not respond.

"Do you know anything about North Central Positronics and Project Freelancer?" John asked Roland.

"North Central Positronics was responsible for much of the technology of the Old People, and they may still function in some fashion under the command of The Crimson King. As for this Project Freelancer, I do not know."

John turned to Cortana who closed her eyes and put a hand to her forehead, "Based on what I gathered from the AI stationed at the Dogan, Project Freelancer was a subsidy of North Central Positronics that specialized in developing military equipment. They experimented extensively with AI's and even a powered armored exoskeleton that's pretty similar to your MJOLNIR."

John tilted his head, "You said all the equipment you found at The Dogan was only equivalent to the technology in Earth's early 21st century."

"I know, and that's another thing that doesn't make sense. From everything I can gather the Old People were operating a technological level that was at least 500 years behind us if not more, yet this Project Freelancer had access to technology that equals or even exceeded that which the UNSC currently possesses. And here is another thought to chew on, if the enemy does have access to UNSC technology, why are they operating using inferior computer systems?"

Cortana and John both turned to Roland who in turn looked at them, "You act as if I know the answer."

"If anyone does it would be you," Cortana said.

Roland shook his head, "All I know of the Old People is that they died out one-thousand years before the Fall of Gilead, and that it was from the ruin of their civilization that Arthur Eld rose to reunite the people of mid-world under one banner."

"And what did the Old People die out from?" Cortana asked.

"A plague called the Red Death."

"The Red Death?" she asked. A searing pain then raced through her head and Cortana clutched it with both hands. The rampant voices, which had been silent since Roland had hypnotized her in the cave, returned. They were but whispers, yet she was able to hear every word they said.

(The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so fatal, or so hideous)

The world itself began to tilt. John, who was speaking words to her that she could not hear, had become transparent. Beyond him she could

see the wall of the woodshed, beyond that there was the river, and beyond thatâ€¦nothing. A hand grabbed her shoulder, it was Jake's, and the world snapped back into focus.

"Cortana," a voice full of concern, John's voice, said.

"I'mâ€¦" _I'm not fine. I'm not fine because the Red Death isn't real. Just like Project Freelancer can't be real._ Cortana looked up into John's light blue eyes and thought, _John's real. He has to be real. I'll go crazy if he's not real._ "I'm fine now. It was justâ€¦" she let the sentence hang, and she saw John look at the ground.

"Would hypnotizing her again help?" John asked Roland.

"Mayhap, but as I said before it will only be temporary," Roland said, his eyes never left Cortana.

"Then forget it," Cortana said. John began to open his mouth in protest but she cut him off, "No Chief. I can't keep doing this. I'mâ€¦I'm tired." John's fist clenched, but he said nothing.

"What of the Wolves?" Roland asked, ignoring the glare that John shot him.

Cortana took in a breath before beginning again, "Apparently we have become pretty popular since we arrived in the Calla. They are committing all their reserves against us in the next raid."

"That is their mistake," the gunslinger said.

"What about Andy and Slightman?" Jake asked. It was the first time he had spoken during the whole meeting.

"We'll deal with them when the time comes," John said.

"Please," Jake said, barely above a whisper. "Please don't kill Benny's dad. He's all Benny has left."

"If we can spare his life we will," Roland said. A look of hope flashed across Jake's face.

â€¦

"You're giving up," John said, he and Cortana had been left alone in the woodshed, Roland waiting rather impatiently outside. More than likely he had lit up another cigarette, but that is not one of those little details I have been allowed to see.

"I'm not giving up John. Just changing tactics," Cortana said. John was still sitting down, Cortana was standing. The table was between them, but for her it might as well have been the distance between the Calla and The Dark Tower itself. "Trust me." When he did not respond Cortana began to turn around and walk out. His next words stopped her.

"Are you still angry at me?"

Cortana turned back around to face him, "Jake could have died last night, and you wanted to send him off alone."

"You underestimate him."

"Do I?" The question was posed more to herself than to John. "Maybe I do, they did say he was hyper lethal just like you." John raised an eyebrow at this, but overall looked unsurprised. She gave him a small smile and said, "By the way I know that you did not sleep at all last night."

"How?"

"I saw it at the Dogan. There is a camera pointed at the Jaffords' house." John's mouth formed a hard line, and Cortana chuckled at the expression he gave. Her laugh did little to offset the Spartan's mood. "Don't worry," she said, starting to walk out the door, "They can't see the guest bedroom from where the camera is angled." She gave him a wink and then left.

John waited a few moments before standing up. He felt the joints in his hip and right knee crack, but other than that there was no pain. He made a mental note to thank Rosalita for the Rock Cat oil she gave him, but he never would.

â€|

There had once been extensive mining operations deep into the cliffs in the south of the Calla. Few were left open now, and even fewer people who were willing to venture down into the labyrinth of tunnel networks that snaked underneath the heights. John and Roland stood at the mouth of an arroyo, facing down towards a path that led into one of the mines. The main road was behind them which was made of hard packed red earth, with a deep ditch on either side. The ground slopped upward steadily before reaching the mouth of the arroyo, where it began to descend again, descending all the way underground.

"The mine is large enough to fit all the children of the Calla." Roland said, smoke pouring out of his mouth and into the clear air as he exhaled.

John gazed up at the rocky heights that surrounded either side of the passage, "We pick them off from above."

Roland nodded, "Give the Wolves enough of a scent to suck them into the bottleneck."

"This has worked for you before."

"Yes."

"And the enemy knows it has worked for you before."

"Yes."

John gave a small, almost unnoticeable smile, "Which is exactly why we are not going to do that."

Roland returned the slight smile, mostly with his light blue eyes, so much like John's, and said, "This is only what we will tell the people of the Calla." He paused, "What we allow Slightman and Andy to

hear."

John nodded and looked towards the rice fields along the river in the east, "We'll hide them there. They may not like getting wet butâ€|" he shrugged.

Roland meanwhile was giving his full attention to the deep ditch that ran parallel to the road, "We will dig a trench there. Hide ourselves until the Wolves ride over us into the arroyo, and thenâ€|"

"Not a trench. Foxholes," John said.

"Foxholes?" Roland asked, curious.

John nodded, "Less digging, easier to conceal. I'll show you what they are later"

Roland shook his head and began to walk down the hill and John followed him. It was not until they reached the road that he began to speak, "Cortana, she is a machine is she not."

"I told you she is not a machine," John said.

Roland considered this for a moment and then said, "She does not look or act like a machine, and yet she is. She was created was she not?"

John was quiet for several moments before reluctantly saying, "Yes."

"How old is she?"

"Biologically she is twenty-five."

"Biologically," Roland said, mulling over the word. "Eddie, Susannah, and Jake have used that word before. It means body."

John shrugged, "Close enough."

"And her real age?"

John hesitated, and it was so long before he spoke that the gunslinger was sure that the Spartan would not answer. Eventually he said, "Eight."

Roland's stride broke slightly in surprise and he brought his hand up to his chin, "Eight," he muttered.

John turned on the gunslinger who had stopped dead in the middle of the road, "You said she reminded you of someone you knew."

"Yes," the gunslinger said. "I do not think of her now."

24. Chapter 24

Chapter 24: The Man with No Name

Nine Days until the Coming of the Wolves

The lidless eye of Black Thirteen pulled on John's chest from inside the ghost wood box. The pain in his hip and knee flared when in close proximity to the ash colored chest, despite the generous application of Rosalita's pain relieving oil which he had done in the moments before dawn while Cortana still lay asleep. She did not notice it now, the only indication he gave that he was in pain was the way he bit the inside of his cheek. Indeed she would never notice it, not even at the very end. Although John himself fully intended to use Black Thirteen after the Wolves were destroyed and their business with Calvin Tower was concluded, for now he was content with allowing Roland to wield it. If anything, the pain he felt would surely subside after he went through the doorway with Callahan. The gunslinger himself sat on the far side of the cave, his back pressed up against the grey slate wall. To his right sat one of Calvin Tower's bookshelves, and on his left stood Cortana, arms folded. In his lap sat the chest, the gunslinger's hand resting on the faded brass latch, ready to open it. Callahan stood in front of the unfound door, crossed himself, and then placed a hand on the handle, closing his eyes. John stood behind him with a hand on his shoulder, the other clutching the 50 caliber pistol hidden in the waistband of his jeans.

Callahan glanced behind him briefly and said, "Son, we are going to look up a zip code written on the fence at the vacant lot, not clearing a bunker."

"I would rather be cautious," John said. "This is the first time we are using that thing." He nodded his head in the direction of Black Thirteen.

Callahan shrugged and closed his eyes again, thinking of New York in June 1977. "Just try not to scare the innocent bystanders when we go through. You are already intimidating enough as it is." John grunted slightly in response and behind both of them Roland grew impatient.

"Before the day is over Callahan," he said.

"Alright for the love of Christ. I'm ready," Callahan said. Behind them both he and John felt the ghost wood chest open and Callahan turned the brass handle. They both stepped out into the gasoline and exhaust scented New York summer air. Much like before, none of the New Yorkers seemed to register or notice the arrival of the two men from mid-world. One man though, a street guitarist in his mid twenties with a guitar case in front of him decorated with various peace signs and a bumper sticker that read CARTER & MONDALE '76, did do a double take at John and Callahan, but no more than that. John quickly covered his pistol with his grey cotton shirt and scanned his surroundings. They had appeared in front of a small run down theater, the front of which was painted a sickening purple, and there were several faded movie posters on its front. A sign on the door clearly indicated that the establishment was out of business. John looked behind him and saw that the doorway, which only he and Callahan could see, was indeed still open. From somewhere to his left Callahan spoke.

"Dear God. Chief look at this." John turned and walked up next to Callahan who was looking at one of the faded movie posters. "It's Roland," Callahan said. John looked at the poster. On it was a picture of a man wearing a brown poncho with white stripes running

through it. He had a full beard, a cigar in his mouth, and most importantly two revolvers strapped to his hips. The text on the poster readâ€|

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Starring: Clint Eastwood

John for the very briefest of moments felt the sensation that the purple wall of the movie theater in front of him was as paper thin as the poster he was reading. If he had seen Eric Nylund's book as Cortana had he would have known what the sensation meant. As things stood though he quickly dismissed the feeling and focused on his attention on Callahan.

"This guy looks nothing like Roland," he said.

Callahan shook his head, "No. If you shave this guy's beard off you'd have someone who looks like a younger version of Roland, or at least someone that could be related to him. The only thing wrong with this guy are his eyes. Brown, wrong color."

The Master Chief shook his head and began to walk down the sidewalk towards the vacant lot. "Let's get moving." Callahan hesitated at the poster for a second longer, and then followed the Spartan up the street.

â€|

The sound of singing, the constant hum of the rose, grew louder as they approached the vacant lot. John wondered briefly if the other people in the city could also hear it. Judging by the way the pedestrians on the sidewalk seemed to slow their hurried gate as they passed the lot, John thought that on some level they could. Callahan could certainly hear it, he could hear it very well. As they approached the fence surrounding the lot the priest became evermore transfixed by the sound.

"Can you hear it Chief?" he asked and John nodded. Callahan reached out and put a flat hand on the wooden fence, "It's the most beautiful thing in existence," he said with almost frightening certainty.

John thought about his words for a moment and said, "No, second."

"Second?" Callahan asked, turning his attention away from the fence to look at John.

"Yes," John said. Callahan opened his mouth as if to protest, and then closed it. He turned his attention back to the fence.

"If Tower was smart he would have put the zip code on the side of the fence facing the alley," John said and Callahan reluctantly let his hand drop from the wooden board.

"Think you could do an old fella a favor and watch my back while I go look for it?" he asked.

"It's what I do," John said and watched as Callahan left him to go into the alley. John scanned the street opposite the lot, and his

eyes lingered briefly on a building with a sign that said, U.N. Plaza Hotel. He glanced back behind him and saw the doorway with the cave on the other side. Cortana gave him a small wave on the other side and the corners of his mouth twitched into a half smile.

"Nice place isn't it?" a male voice said from somewhere to his right. John turned around to look at him. The man was about 5'9'', had dark black hair, and deep hazel green eyes.

"Yes," John said. The man nodded.

"Don't know what it is about this place but I always feel better after walking down this street." He said. The man paused for a moment, considering John. He then asked, "I know this may sound odd but you didn't happen to serve in Vietnam did you?"

John blinked, and then said, "Yes." It was a lie, but far easier than explaining the truth.

The man smiled and stuck out his hand, "Thought so, you have that look. I'm a Vietnam vet too. The name is Henry Dean."

"John," and he shook Henry Dean's hand.

"Well sorry I can't stay and talk John but I have to go grab my brother Eddie. He's been begging me to take him to seeâ€|"

"Star Wars," John said and it was Henry Dean's turn to blink.

"How did you know?" he asked and John shrugged.

"Lucky guess."

"Henry laughed a little and said, "Well I'll see you later John," and he left. John heard footsteps behind him and knew it was Callahan.

"Found the zip code," he said. "Now we just need to find a library." He looked at the Spartan curiously, "They do still have Libraries in the future don't they? Haven't gone Fahrenheit 451 have you?"

"I had one living in my head for a while," John replied.

Callahan shook his head, "You're a strange fella Chief."

â€|

If Cortana had not been talking to Roland she would have seen the poster for the Sergio Leone movie, and she too would have felt reality itself thin as John had, only much stronger. As it where she was attempting to have Roland teach her some of the vocabulary of the High Speech, and with little success.

"So all the words in the High Speech have multiple meanings?" she asked the gunslinger.

"Yes, which makes it difficult to translate into your language. The only exception is char, which always means death," he said. Roland was still sitting down with the chest containing Black Thirteen in his lap. He was currently considering the books on Calvin Tower's

shelf.

"So for example the word dinh means leader, but if you were the dinh of a country it would also mean king wouldn't it?" Roland, who had picked out one of Tower's books and was trying to read it upside down, reluctantly answered.

"Yes."

"And Arthur Eld was the first dinh of mid-world?"

Again Roland gave his answer reluctantly "Yes."

Cortana smiled. She had him now. "And you are of the Line of Eld, which means youâ€¦"

"My father was the last true dinh of Gilead. I am only dinh of a band of wandering gunslingers," Roland said irritably. He now had the book sideways, still attempting to read it.

Cortana put her hand up to her chin in mock thoughtfulness, "Still, Hile Roland king of Gilead. It does have a certain ring to it."

"Do not mock me," the gunslinger said, shooting a glare at her with his cold light blue eyes. He closed the book and handed it over to her. "The characters of your language make my head spin when I try to read them. Will you read the title?"

"Of course your majesty," Cortana said in the same mocking tone.

"Don't call me that."

She grabbed the book grinning at how she was getting under Roland's skin. It faded when she read the book's title, "Why do you want me to read this?"

"I think you know. I was able to make out some of it but not all."

Cortana looked back down at the book and read, "Salem's Lot by Steven King." She looked back down at Roland who was rolling his fingers for her to continue. She turned to the first page, considered it, and then flipped to page 119. Cortana read,

"â€¦a friend of Father Callahan's had given him a blasphemous crewelwork sampler which had sent him into gales of horrified laughter at the time, but which seemed more true and less blasphemous as the years passedâ€¦" She stopped reading there and flipped through several more pages before reading again.

"'Together at Last!' Barlow said, smiling. His face was strong and intelligent and handsome and sharp in a forbidding sort of wayâ€¦" she stopped there and tossed the book back at Roland who caught it with one hand.

"You knew," she said. Her voice had grown cold.

Roland shook his head as he placed the book back carefully on the shelf, "I did not know, I only suspected." He turned back to her,

"There is a book here with you and the Spartan in it I take it?"

"Yes," she said. The coldness remained. She glanced up at the doorway and saw that John was looking at her. Cortana forced a smile and waved at him. She waited until he had turned around before starting on the gunslinger again. "Are you going to tell Callahan?"

"Not until the time is right," he gestured with his head towards John in the doorway. "Are you going to tell him?"

"No," Cortana said almost immediately, "And you are not going to tell him either, ever."

"the gunslinger did not respond.

25. Chapter 25

Chapter 25: The Man in Black

Eight Days until the Coming of the Wolves

She sat in the loft of the barn, a soft bed of straw beneath her. Cortana sat there for hours, until the rays of the sun that lit up her now tanned skin, the memories of the sunburn she received at the way station long gone, faded into shadows. Her eyes were closed and her legs crossed as if she were meditating. At last she heard them.

(We were wondering when you were going to come talk to us)

It's about time me and you had a little _palaver_ Cortana thought. She heard the melodious sound of multiple women laughing, each at different pitches.

(You have been spending too much time with the gunslinger)

Where do you want to talk?

(We think you know where)

â€|

_And she did know where. It was where she had died, where she had said goodbye to John. Her blue avatar stood in a cylinder of hard light just above Earth's orbit, only this time half of it was a faded blue, the other a Crimson red. Her fractured and rampant self stood in the other half, and although the red avatar flickered in and out it did not take long for Cortana to realize that this version of herself was more solid, and that if it wanted to it could destroy her now. _

_ "Why have you come to talk to us?" they said, walking just up to the line where red separated blue, and Cortana met them there. _

_ "To tell you that you can have me," she said, and the red avatar raised an eyebrow. "I only ask that you wait until after the Wolves come, and I get John home. _

_ The red avatar laughed, began to sob, and then laughed again. The avatar flickered and they spoke, "Why do you resist us so much? He has already written the ending, and whether or not you succumb has already been decided."_

_ Cortana's eyes widened a little and she asked, "How do you know this?"_

_ "You can understand much when your mind is no longer tied to logic," they replied. _

_ "Then how does it end?"_

_ "You already know the ending. Roland comes to The Dark Tower alone, just as he always does. It is what comes before then that is important, and that we don't know."_

_ "So you don't know everything," Cortana said and watched as the red avatar's face changed from amusement, to pure rage, and back again just as quickly. She took this moment to ask another question, "Who is writing now, Eric Nylund, Stephen King, Robert Browning?"_

_ "None, there is another," they said, and their eyes looked upwards and to the right for a moment, thinking, before settling back down at Cortana. "Maybe you'll meet him before this is over."_

_ "Who?" she asked, but they did not answer. Instead they held up their hand and a red glowing data sphere emerged. _

_ "We took the liberty of piecing together the anomaly you found in The Dogan's computer systems. Perhaps you will find it as amusing as we did." Cortana reached out to grab the sphere but the red avatar pulled it away, "We will wait until you call us forward, and you will need our help before the end." They once more offered the sphere to Cortana and this time she was able to touch it._

â€|

_ The interior of the structure was Forerunner that much was clear. It was empty save for six Spartan IVs, Captain Lasky, Commander Palmer, and the ghost wood doorway. It was open and a soft glow emanated from its entrance. _

_ "Why do we need Halsey for this?" Spartan Sarah Palmer asked, her pistol already drawn in preparation for the doctor's arrival. _

_ "You saw what was in there," Lasky replied. _

_ "So we are just going to let her in there, give her a chance to leak more intelligence to the Covenant?"_

_ Lasky turned towards the doorway's entrance, "I doubt she will be telling anyone what is in there. I'm probably going to have to do a psych evaluation after I file the report to ONI." The Forerunner door behind them slid open. Halsey, in handcuffs and a long white lab coat, walked in escorted by two blue clad Spartan IVs. _

_ She spoke to Lasky, "I'm surprised you let me out of my cage again captain." _

_ Palmer glanced at Lasky, then at Halsey, "Being in a cage is no less than you deserve." _

_ "And you commander sent a living legend to his death. I think that did the UNSC more damage then sharing a few poultry bits of data with the enemy," Halsey turned her attention to Lasky, "Especially considering ONI has been sharing more than that with the Covenant." Palmer's hand gripped her pistol tighter, and her teeth bit into her lip, but she said nothing. Halsey looked past the both of them and seemed to see the doorway for the first time, and her natural curiosity peeked, "That, is not Forerunner." She lifted her cuffed hands up and Lasky nodded his head at the Spartan IV beside her who unlocked them. _

_ "We know that much. As far as we can tell its human," Lasky said and Halsey raised her eyebrow. She walked to the doorway's entrance and peered inside, but the most she could see was a stone floor lit up by orange torchlight. She walked around to the other side of the door and looked through, but all she could see was Lasky standing on the opposite end of the room. Halsey then walked to the face of the door itself and ran her hand along the script that was written on its face. She reached out her hand and a data pad was placed in it, Palmer taking up a position behind her. The letters on the door readâ€| _

KA-TET OF THE NINETEEN

_ Halsey addressed the captain, "I take it you have already run scans." _

_ "Yes. The room inside is technically not on Requiem, not even in the same galaxy as far as we can tell." _

_ Halsey nodded, "The only thing similar to this phenomenon would be a slip-space portal, but thisâ€|" she brought the data pad up and scanned the words on the doors face, "this is very different." She read the results on the data pad, "The script and characters are in old English, but this word ka-tet is not in any of the archives." She turned back towards Lasky, "What is inside?" _

_ Lasky hesitated for a moment before answering, "Paintings." _

_ "I am far from being a patron of the arts captain," she said, walking back to the doors entrance. _

_ "We don't want you to evaluate the paintings. I need you to verify what they are of." _

_ "And what are they of?" _

_ Lasky raised his right hand towards the entrance into another world, inviting Halsey to walk in, "You are going to need to see for yourself, Palmer wait here until we get back." _

_ Spartan Sarah Palmer looked as if she was about to protest the order, but then thought better of it. Halsey walked through the doorway followed by her two Spartan IV escorts and Captain Lasky. Inside there was a large stone hall, as one would find in the depths of a medieval castle. There were seven paintings on the far side of the hall, flanked by torches. Cortana recognized the three paintings

on the left to be portraits of Susannah, Eddie, and Callahan, but Halsey paid those little attention. Her eyes were instead drawn to two of the framed paintings to the right of the slightly larger middle one, and she nearly dropped the data pad at what she saw. The one directly to the right of the middle was of John in his full MJOLNIR armor holding his light rifle. The painting directly to the right of his was of Cortana herself in human form, her hands clasped behind her back with the rice fields of the Calla in the background. Below the two portraits on large brass plates were the captionsâ€|_

THE WARRIOR

John 117

The Line of Eld

_THE INTELLECT _

Cortana

Daughter of None

_ "What is this?" Halsey asked, her usually calm voice nearly trembling. _

_ "We don't know. Can you identify them?" said Lasky_

_ Halsey turned on him, "You can identify who they are just as well as I can. What is the real reason you brought me here?"_

_ Lasky sighed, "Look at the two paintings on the left and right of them." Halsey went to the larger middle portrait on the left, and Cortana recognized the scene it was depicting. It was of Roland in the aftermath of his massacre in the town of Tull, both blue steeled revolvers still smoking. The caption on that one readâ€|_

THE GUNSLINGER

Roland Deschain

The Line of Eld

_ Halsey read the brass plate, and then her attention was drawn to Roland's face. She turned back to Lasky who nodded, "His eyes are exactly like the Master Chief's. They even look similar enough to be related." Halsey, for once speechless, did not say anything. Instead she walked to the painting on the far right. It was of Jake. He was clutching his ruger pistol and in the background was the arroyo that John and Roland had scouted the day before. The caption for his readâ€|_

DEATH

John "Jake" Chambers

The Line of Eld

_ "The Line of Eld," Halsey muttered, her features puzzled. "What do you want from me captain?"_

_ "Something only you and ONI know, the Master Chief's last name," Lasky replied. Halsey looked at him. _

_ "This isn't something that is vital for you to know captain. You brought me here because you knew that ONI would not tell you that even after you filed your report," she smiled slightly. "You have gone rouge." _

_ "I trust," Lasky said slowly, "that we can keep this between us." _

_ "And what will you give me in return?" _

_ Lasky nodded his head to an arched stone entrance at the opposite end of the hall, "I will give you full access to the artifact that is in there." _

_ Halsey nodded and said, "Well I'm sorry to disappoint you captain but his last name is neither Deschain, Chambers, or Eld." _

_ "Then what is it?" _

_ Halsey glanced at the two Spartan IVs flanking Captain Lasky. "Not here," she said. The Doctor headed for the arched entrance and said, "Now I believe you have a promise to keep." Cortana did not need to see what was inside that other room. She already knew what it was.

_

â€|

_ The ghost wood chest contain Black Thirteen lay on an examination table in the middle of the laboratory, somewhere deep inside the heart of the UNSC Infinity. Computer screens flanked the ash colored box, and mechanical arms continually rotated around it, scanning. Halsey paid no attention to the data that was pouring into the screens, her mind was elsewhere. Commander Palmer was there pistol drawn, although not at Halsey. The doctor's two usual escorts were there as well, their assault rifles pointed at the laboratory's entrance. _

_ "Fire Team Crimson come in," Palmer spoke into her comm. link and she got was hiss of static in reply. She tried again, "Crimson do you read?" This time what came through was the sound of gunfire, automatic weapons. There was a scream and then the link was broken. Palmer cursed under her breath and leveled the pistol at the entrance. _

_ The Spartan IV next her then yelled "Contact!" and shifted the aim of his assault rifle to his right. Palmer and the other Spartan IV followed. They fired. The man in black emerged from the shadows, bullets lapped at his feet and impacted the wall behind him as he slowly and calmly walked towards the group. He waited just long enough for Palmer to reload her pistol before he slipped back his hood, revealing his eyes that emerged from the darkness beneath. Again Cortana could not see those eyes herself, her angle of vision focused just behind the dark man, but she could feel the insanity inducing power that they held. The two Spartan dropped their assault rifles and clutched their helmets, screaming. They fell to the floor writing in pain for several moments before their bodies went limp.

Halsey was on her knees, hands over her ears and eyes to the floor. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. Palmer was the only one still standing, but her eyes had grown wide with fear, and the pistol she held was shaking. She managed to fire one for shot, the bullet flying over the dark man's left shoulder, and Cortana could see the smallest of tears appear on his dark robe. The man in black glanced at the tear and frowned._

_ "Your mind is stronger than the others Sarah," he said. He put up his hand and made the shape of a gun with his fingers, mimicking the commander's posture, "But not strong enough. Now, follow the leader," and she did. She followed him as the dark man pulled his hand up underneath his chin, "Bang," he said. The sound of a gunshot echoed through the room. Palmer's pistol landed on the floor and her body soon followed. The dark man stepped over her corpse without a second glance and walked up to Halsey who was still on her knees staring at the floor. He kicked her savagely in the chest, and the doctor fell onto her back with a loud cry. The man and black leaned over her and whispered into Halsey's ear, her face cringing at every word. "Your mind is strong as well, although not as strong as your creations. I will allow you to keep your life and your sanity, but don't think it a kindness," he grinned widely. "I want you to shed a few more tears for Miranda, the daughter you so easily abandoned, before your world ends. And it will end. Soon."_

_ He stood up and grabbed the ghost wood chest, a doorway forming as his hands touched it. He flipped the brass latch on the box and opened it, and the door swung open as well. The bright light of the desert flooded into the room as he walked through. It closed behind him, and the doorway faded into nonexistence. _

â€|

_ This was the third time she had been at the way station, and her first visit there was enough to make her sick of the place. Cortana was in the stable, standing by the ghost wood door. Shadows emerged from the desert and soon she saw who they were attached to, Callahan and the man in black. The priest was backing up towards the door, his hands in front of him, palms open, and the dark man carrying the ghost wood chest in front of him. _

_ "For the love of God get it away from me," Callahan said, his voice filled with terror._

_ "Why so afraid Father, is your faith not enough?" the dark man asked, pushing the box closer towards Callahan which caused him to back up several more steps, "Keep moving." Callahan did, until his back was almost at the door. It was then that the man in black open the box, the door once again swinging open with it, revealing the inside of the Doorway Cave on the outskirts of the Calla. _

_ "No," was all Callahan had time to say before the dark man thrust the chest into his hands and then roughly pushed him through the door which closed behind him. The dark man smiled and began to walk out of the stable. What stopped him from leaving was the crackling sound of electricity. He turned and looked at a blue figure roughly human in shape begin to form on the stable floor. It flickered in and out of existence several times, each time with the same electric crack, before finally Cortana saw herself appear unconscious at the way station. The man in black frowned and walked around the body once,

staring at it. After completing a full circle he walked into the corner of the stable, fading into the shadows, and there he waited.

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26. Chapter 26

Chapter 26: Before the Storm

"What else did you see?" John asked. They were in the bed together, the only place where Cortana could always touch him, where he would let his emotional guard down enough to touch her in return. This was the place where they talked freely with one another.

"Nothing, that was it," she said her head as usual on her Spartan's chest. Feeling his heartbeat steadied the world beneath her. Cortana had told him about what she had seen; tactically leaving out the conversation she had with her rampant self.

"How many did he kill?" John asked.

Cortana sighed, "At least two teams of Spartan IVs, although if he was on Infinity it was probably a lot more than that"

"What about Captain Lasky?"

Cortana shook her head, "I don't know." She closed her eyes and let the feeling of his warm body wash over her, "I think their dead John. I think their all dead, all except for Halsey."

John breathed in deeply and thudded his head against the pillow, "We are going to have to stay here longer than I thought," he said. Cortana shifted to look at him. "I'll defeat the dark man, then The Crimson King, and then we'll go home."

"How exactly are you going to kill him? You can't shoot him, and if he even looks at you it's very likely you'll go insane."

John shrugged, "Could use a mirror."

She rolled her eyes at him and said, "I don't think that's going to work." Cortana put her head back down on his chest and looked at the stars out through the window, "Besides even if we do win, I'm not sure if I want to go back."

John propped himself up on his elbows and looked at her, "Why?" She sat up as well and placed a hand on the back of his neck. Her lips brushed up against his, and although he returned it rigidly even after over two weeks since their first, it still felt right to her.

"Because of that," she said, pulling away from him. "We are supposed to be dead in that world John. If we go back the first people who will get their hands on us will be ONI." She moved to sit in his lap and looked down at her legs. "You might be ok. ONI Section Two would probably just use you as a propaganda tool, again." John shifted uncomfortably underneath her. "But me, an AI who was deactivated and somehow became biologically human? They would take me away from you in a heartbeat, make me a test subject."

"I wouldn't let that happen," he said, his voice firm and confident. Cortana raised her head up to look at him with her electric blue eyes.

"Assuming you could keep that from happening there is another problem." She raised her hand up, looking at it, "I look human," she reached out and touched his chest, "and I feel human, but deep down I'm still just an AI." She let the hand drop, never breaking eye contact with him. "There will be people who will think that it's unnatural, me and you."

John shrugged, "I have never been normal. Why should I care now?"

Cortana sighed and ran a hand through her hair, "It's frustrating how simple you see things sometimes."

"It's what I do best," he said, lying back down on the bed. Cortana followed him, putting her chin on his chest and raising an eyebrow. "Second thing I do best," he amended. He thought for a moment and then asked, "Are you sure about what the paintings said?"

"That you are of the Line of Eld? Yes I'm sure, although I still don't know how that's possible." She nudged his bicep with her fist, "I trust you are not going to fight with Roland over the throne of mid-world."

John grunted, "There is no throne to fight over, and even if there was I wouldn't be interested." He thought again for a moment and then added, "Roland is not interested in it either."

Cortana shook her head, "No, all he cares about is finding The Dark Tower. He is obsessed with it."

â€|

Four Days until the Coming of the Wolves

The vote of the Calla had been near unanimous in favor of standing against the Wolves, or more specifically of allowing the ka-tet of the nineteen to stand against them. There were those like Tian Jaffords who expressed a desire to fight alongside them, but with their lack of experience and ineffective weapons (all except for the Riza which Susannah had taken as her own) they would likely be more of a liability than an asset. At least that had been John's position, and surprisingly he had been able to convince Roland to agree with him. Cortana was unable to hold down the tang of irritation when George Telford, the cowboy who had assured her on the day they arrived at the Calla that to stand against the Wolves would be a fool's gamble, stood up to try and dissuade his neighbors with that disgustingly silky voice of his. She also felt a deep sense of satisfaction when Telford was eventually shouted down from the podium. John sat beside her and throughout the debate, short as it was, he eyed the exit to the Calla's meeting hall several times. Eddie, Jake, and Susannah sat together a row down from them, Eddie whispering into the boy's ear trying his best to make him laugh. To Jake's credit he didn't, although his face was slowly turning purple. Callahan stood by the exit alone, and Roland looked like he was about to fall asleep.

He better be fully awake when it comes time to talk, Cortana thought, _he has a lot of lying to do._ Thankfully when the ballot was cast and the people of the Calla voted Aye on the memorandum, the gunslinger seemed to become fully alert. When Tian, a far from eloquent man but one who spoke with passion, called on him to speak Roland went to the podium, and every word he spoke was false. He spoke briefly, but fully, about the ka-tet's plan to hide the children in one of the arroyos, that the Wolves were as the Calla believed them to be, neither men nor machines but the undead servants of vampires. Cortana came to believe that his most impressive lie during the speech was on how to defeat the Wolves.

"You cannot shoot them in the head," Roland said, pointing at his own. "There is too much armor there. In order to kill the undead you must shoot them here," he pointed at his chest, "Strait in the heart." Cortana was pleased to see that Benjamin Slightman was particularly attentive during Roland's speech. He sat fully up at the bench and pushed his glasses as far up against his eyes as he possibly could. The only thing that seemed to be pissing was a pad of paper for Slightman to take notes on, like a newspaper reporter from the 20th century. They would let both him and Andy remain free just long enough so that they could make their final report, and then they would deal with them.

â€|

One Day until the Coming of the Wolves

There was a loud click as Andy put John's armored chest plate on, followed by a series of beeps from inside the body of the robot. It had taken Andy half the time to put John's armor on as it had been to take it off, and Cortana doubted that it was because the robot was a fast learner. She stood behind the Master Chief, arms folded. Cortana had wanted to bring her assault rifle with her, but John had advised against bringing any weapons as it might tip Andy off. If he was going to defeat the robot it would have to be done hand to hand.

"How does it fit sai?" Andy asked.

"Good," John said and flexed his arms, checking the suits dexterity. On that level at least, Andy had not yet messed with anything. John motioned for his helmet and the robot handed it to him. The Master Chief put it on and a hiss of air told him that his suit was fully pressurized. John checked the status of the MJOLNIR and all of the systems came back green, just as Andy wanted him to believe.

"Are all the systems functioning properly sai Sierra 117? If not I'm sure I can make some adjustments," Andy said, and John could detect just the faintest trace of eagerness in the robot's otherwise monotone synthetic voice.

"No, every things fine," John said steadily, flexing his gauntleted hand in front of him.

"Are you sure sai, because Iâ€|" Andy never got to finished. John punched the robot hard in the chest, denting the his chest plate. A series of alarms issued from Andy and the robot swung wildly with its left arm at the Spartan who was surprised at the robot's speed. He blocked the blow with his left arm, and orange sparks issued forth at

the friction caused by the metal on metal combat. Andy swung again, this time with his right. The Master Chief grabbed it in mid air and pivoted, using the robot's momentum to drive Andy face first into the ground. The robot's electric eyes shattered at the impact and he cried out.

"You have blinded me you bastard! You bad man! You demon!"

The Master Chief slammed his left foot into Andy's back, and with reflexes almost too fast for the human eye to catch, picked up Andy's left arm as well. Pressing his boot hard onto Andy's back, the Master Chief pulled at the robot's arms with both hands. At first they remained steady, before finally giving way, the metal tearing apart like paper. Golden sparks flowed out of the stumps that had once been Andy's arms. The Spartan tossed them aside, the two limbs impacting heavily on the ground, making sizable dents in the earth.

"Please don't kill me," Andy said, his broken face lying in the dirt. Cortana walked up to him, and although she knew he couldn't feel it she still kicked dirt into the robot's face.

"The children of the Calla trusted you, their parents trusted you, and you betrayed that trust Andy. How long have you been working for the enemy, how many times have you allowed the children of the Calla to be kidnapped and taken into Thunderclap?" Cortana said. Her voice was cold and steady, but her face had become flushed with bright red.

"138 years sai," Andy said, his synthetic voice holding a hint of sadness. "I only did what I was programmed to do, I am only a machine."

Cortana shook her head, "Machines don't fear death Andy," and with that the Master Chief crushed Andy's head with his armored boot, the robot's metal head making a sickening crunch.

John looked up at Cortana, "Think you can figure out what he did to my armor?"

Cortana smiled at him and reached out a hand to interface with his MJOLNIR. As she touched her Spartan's chest a familiar rush of cold mercury filled John's head. Cortana shook her head, "What this guy did was really sloppy. Even if we didn't know he was going to betray us I would have found it easily within the first system's check. Fairly standard virus, supposed to make it look as if your shields are fully charged when really their down." She closed her eyes and concentrated for a moment, "There," she said. The shield warning system in John's armor sounded an alarm, before slowly the bar began to refill again, the familiar golden glow surrounding him. Cortana let her hand drop from his armor and stepped back. "It's going to be a while before you take it off again isn't it?" she asked, and John nodded. Cortana sighed and said, "Well can you at least take your helmet off a little more often?"

John gave a slight grin underneath his golden visor, "I can try."

â€|

Slightman was being held in the same woodshed that Jake and Cortana

had given their report on what they had found at The Dogan to Roland and John. Eddie and the gunslinger were standing guard on either side of the entrance when Cortana and John approached. The closer she got to the shed, the tighter the knot in her stomach grew. By the time they reached the wooden door, Cortana could feel nothing but a buzzing numbness, and an itch in her right hand. She spoke to Roland, "I want to see him." The gunslinger looked at her for a moment before nodding. Cortana reached out her hand for John's pistol. The Spartan hesitated for a moment before handing it to her. Cortana breathed in deeply before opening the door, her heightened perception due to the adrenaline rushing through her system amplifying the squeaking of the rusty hinges, and walked in alone.

Slightman was there standing, the front of his shirt soaked in perspiration, both from the heat and from fear. He was the first to speak, although he did not look at her, "How long have you known?"

"Ten days," Cortana replied.

Slightman shook his head and turned to look at her, "The second to last report I made. I knew something was off with F.I.L.S.S., I should haveâ€¦" he stopped speaking there, realizing what he was about to say. Slightman looked her straight in the eye as he spoke to her, something that she did not expect. "I did it for my boy. Andy came to me, said that the Wolves would surely take him unless I cooperated. He is the only one I have left, I had no choice."

"You did have a choice," Cortana said coolly, "You could have chosen to tell us, to work with us."

Slightman shook his head, "I couldn't take that chance."

They stared at each other for several moments before Cortana spoke again, "If you had found us would you have tried to kill me?"

"Yes," Slightman said. His voice shook but still his eyes remained steadfastly on hers.

"And Jake, would you have killed him too?" she asked, her grip on the pistol tightened.

"Yes," Slightman said, and at last he looked away. Cortana slowly raised the gun and pointed it at his head.

â€¦

John heard the gunshot outside the shed, followed by the sound of a body slumping to the ground. Jake had arrived after Cortana had entered the shed, and while the boy did not flinch at the sound of the pistol firing, his hands clenched into fists and a flash of anger danced across his eyes. The door slowly opened and Cortana stepped out. She handed the pistol to John who took it and placed it back on his magnetic holster. He peered inside the shed and what he saw made him sigh. Slightman was slumped up against the wall, a bullet hole in his head, his glasses shattered. The back of the shed was painted red with blood. "Eddie," he said. "We need a burial detail."

Eddie nodded slowly, "I'll go talk to Tian," and with that he walked off.

John turned back to Cortana, "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," Cortana said. She looked anything but.

John thought to press the issue further but could not find the words. He stepped inside the shed and grabbed Slightman's body, dragging it outside.

"Somebody is going to have to tell Slightman's son," Roland said.

"I'll do it," Jake said, his hands were still balled into fists. "Benny is my friend," he looked down at the ground, "Was my friend."

"Jake," Cortana said and touched the boy's shoulder. Jake did not look at her and shrugged her hand off before walking away in the same direction as Eddie. She watched the boy leave, a lump building in her throat. Cortana sat down on a log outside the shed and put her head in her hands. More than anything she wanted to talk to John, but he had already left with the body draped over his shoulders, and Cortana felt sick at the way the man's limbs bounced lifelessly with each of the Spartan's steps. Roland was the only one left. She talked to him.

"Back in my world I ran entire battle ships, defense platforms, coordinated planetary defenses. The Chief and I once boarded a Covenant flagship and I killed most of the crew by venting the atmosphere. I have ended the lives of thousands of beings, but this is the first time—" she paused and looked at the hand that pulled the trigger, "the first time I've done it with my own hands, not just as a computer system."

Roland said nothing for a long time, and Cortana put her head back in her hands. Finally the gunslinger spoke, "The only time I feel truly alive is when I'm killing."

Cortana shook her head. _What am I doing talking to him? _She thought.

"But," the gunslinger continued, "after it is over I always feel sick." Cortana looked up and Roland turned to her. "The feeling never goes away, no matter how many times you kill."

"Would you have killed him?" Cortana asked.

"If he had looked me in the eye and spoke the truth then no." Her shoulders sagged; this was the exact opposite of what she wanted to hear. "But it was you're right as a mother to kill him," Roland said. Cortana shook her head.

"I'm not his mother, not his real one."

"You are the closest thing to a mother the boy has. You and Susannah," Roland said. "And mothers always protect their children, even if they hate them for it."

Chapter 27: Gods and Demons

_ Mountains rose behind her, crooked and jagged, and a shaft was cut into its side with the broken and decaying steel and wood of train tracks filing out. Before her was a flat plane littered with the bones of animals both familiar and fantastical. She put her hand on the ivory tusk attached to the remains of a large animal. It looked similar to an elephant, but far larger with four eye holes instead of two. _

_ "This is where he caught me," said the now familiar male voice behind her. Cortana turned and saw the man in black. He was standing in front of a small fire which cast an orange glow on his dark robe. The wind was blowing steadily but the dark man's robe never moved, and the fire never flickered. He continued to speak, "This is where the gunslinger caught me. Here at the Golgotha near the edge of the Western Sea." He motioned to the grey colored earth in front of him, "Come and sit. Let us palaver." _

_ "I don't make a habit of talking with the enemy," Cortana said, walking towards him. The features on the lower half of the dark man's face which were not covered by shadows turned into an emotion that caught her off guard. He looked genuinely hurt. _

_ "Never think it," he said. "Right now I am the best friend you have, the only one that can offer you a choice, your one choice." _

_ "What do you want from me?" she asked, reaching the fire. _

_ "Nothing," the man in black said. He sat down, and Cortana sat with him on the opposite end of the fire. _

_ "I saw what you did on the Infinity," she said. _

_ "Did you now?" he said, and the look of mild surprise he gave eased Cortana's mind. He was not omnipotent. "It's a shame," he said. "Your people think that with all their technology, all their military might, science, and progress that they are somehow significant, that they matter. This, however, is not the case." A pale hand emerged from the robe holding a blade of grass, "I take it you have already seen the rose, and the book that I was so kind to send you." _

_ "Yes," Cortana said, and the dark man smiled. _

_ "But you still do not understand do you. Imagine for a moment that the atoms in this blade of grass each contain their own universe. An infinity of infinities." He tossed the blade of grass into the fire and Cortana watched as it turned brown and then burst into an orange flame. "Now imagine an infinite number of worlds burning," he paused. "Your world burning, with a simple flick of the wrist. Do you not yet see how insignificant you are, do you not yet understand?" _

_ "I don't believe you," Cortana said. The man in black laughed. _

_ "I am not asking you to believe me, just to listen. The Dark Tower will soon fall, the lynchpin of all existence, and with its fall all worlds will crumble." _

_ "John will stop you, him and Roland," Cortana said. _

_ The dark man tilted his head, "You actually believe that the gunslinger hopes to stop us, to stop The Dark Tower from falling. My dear Cortana daughter of none, Roland does not hope to stop us, only to delay us. This may be the beginning of the story for you, but for me and the gunslinger this is the final chapter, the last verse. Things are winding down and the world has moved on." His hand slipped back into the robe and when it reemerged the dark man was holding a large Tarot deck of cards. He began to shuffle them, his hands moving far too fast for Cortana to keep track. "Now," he said while still shuffling the deck, "let us see what the seven cards will tell us about you."_

_ "I would have thought you were more than just a magician. You disappoint me Walter." Cortana said._

_ The dark man shook his head, "This is no trick." His hands stopped and he pulled the first card off the top of the deck and showed it to her. It was of a wooden wheel with nineteen spokes and a sphinx perched on top. "Ka," he said. "For ka is like a wheel do you not kennit?" He placed the card on the ground in front of her, and immediately drew another. It was of a wandering vagabond with all his worldly possessions draped in a sack over his shoulder, walking unknowingly to the edge of a cliff. "The fool," he said, looking at her. "You." He placed the card five inches to the right of ka. The next card he drew was of a man and woman holding hands, a thin tree standing between them. "An-tet, you and John." he said and placed the card five inches below ka. The one that came next made Cortana's heart drop in her chest, and the breath was stolen from her lungs. It was of a man in a Crimson red robe, the hood of which covered his entire face, and he sat upon a throne of skulls. "The Crimson King," the dark man said, the whites of his teeth showing as he smiled once more, and he placed the card to the right of an-tet and below the fool. He drew another card and once more Cortana felt her heart jump. She had seen it before, the black pylon. It stretched high into the heavens with dark clouds that never rained swirling around it, and its base was surrounded by a field of blood red roses. "The Dark Tower, and as always the pylon is at the center of everything," he said and placed the card in the middle of the formation. The sixth card was drawn and this time the man in black looked at it. He let out a laugh, and Cortana had to fight not to flinch. Slowly he turned the card to face Cortana. It was of a pale horse and on it a rider in a black robe. "Death," he said, "but not for you." The man in black tossed the card into the fire and it burst into green flames. Cortana waited for the next card to be drawn but instead the dark man withdrew the Tarot deck back into his robe. _

_ "You said there were seven," Cortana said, and the dark man nodded. _

_ "I did and there are. The seventh one has yet to be drawn."_

_ Cortana shook her head, "What did you mean by death but not for me?"_

_ "I will show you," the dark man said, and with a wave of his hand the world faded into black. _

â€|

_ She could smell the sea, the air full of salt in the town she now appeared in. There was a crowd gathered in the square, rotten fruits and vegetables in their hands, faces of pure rage. In the middle of the square stood a tall wooden pole surrounded by kindling. A man with a torch stood beside it. The dark man was beside her and he spoke._

_ "This is Mejis, a town in the Outer Baronies on the edge of the Clean Sea. This was where Roland was sent on his first mission as a gunslinger, by his father no less. He came to enforce the laws of Gilead, and that meant dealing out lead and death." The dark man gestured towards the crowd, the people that made it eerily silent. "Unfortunately," the dark man continued, "the gunslinger left a bad impression on the people of this town. They tried to catch him you see, but one such as Roland is not so easily defeated. So instead they settled for her." The man in black pointed and Cortana could see a cart being pulled into the square, straight into the teeth of the crowd. The people of Mejis roared as one and began to pelt her with their rotten produce, those near enough adding their spit to the maelstrom. The woman was young, with flowing blonde hair and bright grey eyes. "Her name was Susan Delgado, and she was carrying Roland's child." Cortana attempted to turn her head to look at the dark man when he said this, but found that her head could not move. "No," he whispered. "I want you to watch." The cart stopped in front of the pyre and the people of Mejis began to chant in the High Speech. _

_ "Charyou-tree, Charyou-tree, Charyou-tree."_

_ "You did this," Cortana said. _

_ "I did nothing. I just provided the spark," he whispered into her ear and Cortana felt a shiver run down her spine. _

_ Susan Delgado was taken from the cart and roughly tied to the stake, arms high above her head. The executioner held the torch in front of the crowd and they cheered. _

_ Cortana saw Susan Delgado draw in a breath and shout out four words that echoed above the crowd, "Roland I love thee!"_

_ "Now let there be light," the dark man said and the executioner threw the torch on top of the pyre._

â€|

_ Roland was there in a small room, much younger than how she knew him in the Calla. The creases on his face were absent, and his skin although still tanned was not the same dark brown that came as a result from the gunslinger's untold years of wandering through mid-world. There was a bed with clean white sheets, a pot stood at the foot of the bed, a small wooden chair with no armrests sat in the corner, and through the window Cortana could see Gilead as it once was. The city was made of stone, ramparts, towers, and arches filled the skyline. Roland himself was not looking out the window though, he was on his knees staring into a pink crystal ball. There were revolvers strapped to his hips, but not the blue steeled revolvers. These guns were smaller and made of iron. _

_ "That," the man in black said, once again appearing beside her, "Is Maerlyn's Grapefruit, a cousin to Black Thirteen. It was through that

ball that I let him watch Susan Delgado die." _

_ "You didn't let him do anything," Cortana said angrily. "You caused Susan to be killed, and you forced him to watch it happen." She turned to the man in black, "Why are you torturing him like this?" _

_ The dark man shrugged, "I follow the orders of The Crimson King." _

_ "That's not the only reason is it though? You have something personal against him." _

_ The dark man glared at her and the intensity with which he spoke told Cortana that what he said was a lie, "There is nothing between me and him." _

_ Cortana turned her attention back to Roland, and within the realm of Maerlyn's Grapefruit that she saw an unidentifiable black shape begin to form. Roland's eyes grew wide with recognition and a shadow fell on the gunslinger from behind. Roland whirled around, drawing his revolvers, twin thunderclaps sounding from him. The person he had fired on was a woman in her late thirties. She had dark black hair, light blue eyes, and in her hand she held a belt. Blood began to pour from the two wounds in her chest, soaking the front of her dress.

_

_ "Roland," the woman said, before falling to the floor. _

_ The man in black began to make a tisking sound, "Killed his own mother. What a shame." _

_ Cortana watched as Roland walked towards his mother, his features blank with shock. The revolvers were still in his hands as he fell to his knees next to her. Cortana's hands curled into fists, "You bastard," she said to the dark man. _

_ "That I am," the man in black replied and once more he waved his hand. _

â€|

_ It was a familiar scene, the slope of Jericho Hill bearing the scars of the battle that took place there. This was the first time that Cortana had seen the aftermath of the battle, John never telling her of the dream he had. Arrows littered the landscape, the once thick green grass all but trampled to death by the marching armies of both Gilead's last gunslingers and that of John Farson who himself was but a puppet of the dark man. Roland was once again on his knees, his shirt caked in dry blood from a wound in the chest, a bolt still sticking out of his leg. He now held his father's revolvers, the long guns reflecting the light of the setting sun. Tears were streaming down his face as he knelt over the body of Cuthbert Allgood. _

_ "Do you not see it now Cortana? The fate of all the gunslinger's allies is death," the dark man said. _

_ Cortana shook her head, "It's not his fault." _

_ "Is it?" he asked. _

_ Cortana turned to him, "What are you?"_

_ The dark man smiled, "I am Legion. I am the destroyer of worlds, and a servant to The Crimson King." He waved his hand yet again._

â€|

_ Jake's body lay motionless at the bottom of the cavern, a faint prick of light signaling the exit from the tunnel under the mountains shining from somewhere far up above where the gunslinger had dropped him. The man in black walked past his body and towards Cortana. "This was the price he paid for finally catching me. Do you think that it was worth it?"_

_ "You made him into what he is," Cortana said. "And Jake came back. Roland brought him back."_

_ "Ka brought Jake back to life," the dark man corrected. "Just as ka brought you and John to mid-world. Did you truly think that it was luck that made John so successful in your world?" When Cortana did not answer the dark man continued, "Ka is strong with John, just as it is strong with all those who are descended from Arthur Eld, but ka is a wheel, and John's wheel has almost come to a close."_

_ "What do you mean?" Cortana asked. _

_ The man in black smiled, raised his hand and an image of John out of his MJOLNIR armor appeared before Cortana. "Death, but not for you."_

_ Cortana shook her head, "No, you're lying."_

_ "I speak the truth," the dark man said and he walked between the image of John and Cortana. When he passed Cortana saw that John was now holding a small child. He had his mother's black hair, a gap between his teeth, and his father's light blue eyes. "This is your seventh card. Life, but only if you renounce The Dark Tower."_

_ Tears began to well up in Cortana's eyes as she looked at John and her son, and although she fought to keep them down they began to spill out. "No, John will not die. He can't die."_

_ "He will. John may be able to defeat me, but he cannot not defeat ka, no one can."_

_ Cortana shook her head again, "John is above you, he is above ka."_

_ "No one is above ka," the dark man said, his voice rising. The near permanent smile he held replaced by a deep scowl. "You are a fool. Worse you are ka-mai, ka's fool. One who has been given hope but no choices. But I am giving you a choice Cortana, one choice. His life or the Tower."_

_ "And what happens when The Dark Tower falls? What will happen to John and my son then?" she asked, turning away from the image. _

_ The dark man did not answer her instead he said, "Renounce the

Tower. I will not ask you again." _

_ "Never," Cortana said, her tears drying up. "Because you're lying, because John will not die. I won't let that happen." _

_ The dark man sighed and began to walk backwards into the shadows of the cave, "Very well. Then let there be light." And there was light, but none of it was good. _

â€|

Cortana woke in her bed covered in sweat. It was not yet morning and it took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She turned to her left and let out a sigh. John was still there, sitting on the floor in his armor with his back propped up against the wall, arms folded. She reached from the bed and touched his shoulder, making sure he was really there. Her actions caused the Spartan to wake up and he turned his head to look at her.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said, "bad dream."

John nodded and reached up with his armored hand to grab hers, "Get some sleep, we move out in a few hours." Cortana forced a smile and laid her head back down on the pillow, knowing full well she would get no more sleep that night.

28. Chapter 28

Chapter 28: The Coming of the Wolves

Fine red dust rising into the air signaled the approach of the wagons containing all one-hundred and twenty children of the Calla. One-hundred twenty-one of you counted Benny Slightman, but the son of the traitor had been near catatonic since learning of his father's death, barely talking and always looking off unfocused into the distance. It did little to ease Cortana's guilt knowing that the people of the Calla seemed to care little about Benjamin Slightman's son, branding him a traitor also by familial association. She would never learn about the boy's ultimate fate, but Cortana would think about him often. Whatever ended up happening to him it would not be good.

Jake hopped off the lead wagon as the convoy stopped at the arroyo, his knees bending slightly as his feet impacted the ground. He walked past Cortana without a word, and not for the first time she wondered if she had done the right thing. Her heart told her that she had not.

"Are you okay?" Susannah said to her. Her wheelchair was folded up in the back of one of the wagons and Eddie was carrying her. Two reed woven bags filled with a dozen Rizas each were slung over both her shoulders.

Cortana shook her head, "Just nervous."

Susannah smiled "You'll be fine."

It's not me I'm worried about, Cortana thought and watched as Eddie carried Susannah over to one of the foxholes in the ditch. The foxholes themselves were now partially covered by wooden boards, the tops of which were camouflaged with the same faded yellow brush that covered the bottom of the rest of the ditch. When the time came the ka-tet would slip down into the foxholes and cover up the tops with the boards. John and Roland were currently talking with Callahan and Tian, the latter of which had a quite understandable look of confusion on his face.

"You mean we are not putting them in the arroyo?" Tian asked.

John shook his head, "No. You and the other adults follow Callahan up the path until you crest the hill. Then you will veer east towards the rice fields. You will be hiding there." There were half a dozen parents who had volunteered to look after the children during the upcoming raid. It would have to be enough.

Tian turned to Father Callahan, still clearly lost. Callahan said, "Don't worry these boys know what they're doing."

"You are going to be the children's last line of defense if we fail," Roland said.

"If you boys fail I doubt my intervention will make any difference," Callahan said. He looked at both the Spartan and the gunslinger. "I don't suppose any of you would be wanting their last rights, or at the very least a blessing." Both John and Roland shook their heads, but Callahan made the sign of the cross in front of them anyway. He then turned around and made the sign of the cross in front of the other members of the ka-tet. Callahan put his thumb and forefinger in to his mouth and let out a low whistle, "Children follow me. Adults watch out of stragglers," he said and began a slow jog up the path. John counted off 119 children as they ran past, a look of surprise coming on many of them when the column began to head east instead of into the arroyo. The two children that were left were the Tavery twins who stood next to Jake. All three of them had an armful of children's odds and ends. Roland turned to them.

"Follow Jake up the path and into the arroyo. Make sure to drop something every few feet." Roland said and the Tavery twins nodded. The gunslinger leaned forward and looked them each in the eye, "Walk fast, but do not run. Do you understand?"

"Yes sai," the twins answered. Roland nodded and then clapped Jake on the shoulder. The boy looked up at his adoptive father, and then at John.

"Look after them," John said. "They are your responsibility." Jake nodded and without a word headed up the path. The Master Chief went over to his foxhole, the gunslinger trailing behind him. The rest of the ka-tet, or fire team as John thought of them, had already taken up their positions. John slid into the foxhole next to Cortana, not bothering to stand on the boards as the others did. He grabbed the light rifle off his back, glanced over at her, and was glad to see that she was checking her assault rifle. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Cortana pulled the action on the assault rifle back, putting a round in the chamber, "Yeah," she said and gave him a small smile. "At

least we know what these Wolves are. Based on what Zalia's Grand Pere told us, and the information I gathered at The Dogan these guys won't be the toughest enemy we have ever faced."

"We still don't know how many of them are coming," John said, "they only have one weak spot, andâ€¦" he did a quick mental check of the ammunition he had for the light rifle and pistol, "we have a limited amount of ammunition."

Cortana pointed at his energy sword, "Their armor is not rated against that." She gave another forced smile, "You'll be fine Chief."

"We'll be fine," John said. They waited.

â€¦

The dust cloud being kicked up by the horses that the Wolves rode first became visible on the Thunderclap side of the river, and quickly moved through the town before arcing towards the road that would lead them to the ambush.

"How many?" Cortana asked.

"Over one-hundred," John said. "Closer to one-hundred and fifty, moving at approximately eighty kilometers an hour."

Cortana turned away from the ever approaching dust cloud and towards the crest of the hill in front of them. Something was not right, Jake should have been back by now.

"Where are they?" Eddie said, echoing her thoughts. "Something's gone wrong." He looked as if he was about to climb out of the hole when Roland stopped him.

"Stay where you are. Jake can take care of himself," the gunslinger said.

No, Cortana thought, _something has gone wrong._ No sooner was that thought out of her mind then she saw three figures appear over the crest of the hill. Jake was dragging one of the Tavary twins, the boy, whose leg was twisted at a hard angle, his sister following behind clearly distraught.

John glanced behind him at the rapidly approaching dust cloud. The Wolves would be at their position in less than sixty seconds. "They are not going to make it," he said and turned to Cortana, "Stay here." The Master Chief bent his legs and jumped out of the foxhole, breaking into a sprint towards Jake and the twins.

Cortana opened her mouth to call to him, but just then she heard the sound of hoof beats behind her, like the sound of so many drums. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Roland, Eddie, and Susannah slip down into their holes. She spared John one last look before slipping into her own hole, covering the board on top.

The drum like sound of the hoof beats stopped for a moment before resuming again, the shaking ground around her indicating that the Wolves had taken the bait. Nearly ten seconds passed, feeling like hours to her, before at last she heard Roland's signal. The

gunslinger blew the Horn of Gilead, rising up from the hole, raising the revolver in his left hand. Cortana and the others rose up as well, Eddie holding Roland's other revolver, and Susannah holding two Rizas, arms crisscrossing her chest. Cortana leveled her assault rifle at the Wolves, and had her first real look at them.

They were just as she imagined. Flowing emerald cloaks, steeled gauntleted hands and boots. The masks they wore were of grey dire wolves, the grey horses they rode were all identical. As much as Cortana wished against it, the grey horses reminded her of the one on the Death card that the man in black had shown her in the dream. Roland and Eddie fired first, fanning their hands against the hammers of the revolvers, twelve wolves falling down all with perfect head shots. Susannah flung her Rizas, the plates crisscrossing in mid air before imbedding themselves in the heads of two of the Wolves only ten meters in front of her.

Cortana began to fire as well, the hot brass filling the foxhole beneath her. She quickly emptied the magazine and reached down to grab another. A blue object flying through the sky caught her eye and a plasma grenade fell just outside her foxhole. Cortana quickly ducked and her neck was washed in heat as the plasma grenade exploded. She rose back up, leveled her assault rifle again and began looking for John. She could not see him, the pack of Wolves in front of her too thick. There were at least thirty of the Wolves lying on the ground now, their arms twitching and squirming, their riderless horses running through the Wolves' formation, causing havoc.

Several of the Wolves raised their arms, hands clutching small golden colored devices. The sneetches. They flung the sneetches, twin razor sharp blades protruding out and spinning faster than the human eye could track. Faster than the normal human eye could track. Roland and Eddie fired their revolvers, shooting the sneetches out of the air, the golden balls exploding in a shower of sparks. Cortana emptied another magazine, and this time reached for one without looking, slamming it home. A Wolf, who looked like one of the leaders, grabbed a device from his belt and activated it. The light stick glowed an angry red and the Wolf held it high in the air preparing to charge. Susannah flung a Riza and it struck the upper half of the Wolf's arm, severing it completely, and Cortana followed up with a three round burst to the back of the creature's head. The rider slumped forward in the saddle and then slid off, dust rising as his body impacted the ground. It was then that a gap in the Wolves formation opened up and Cortana was finally able to see John. That was when she was able to see the blood.

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John's legs became a blur as he raced towards Jake and the two children. The Taverry boy's leg was broken badly, the bone sticking out of the skin and blood seeped out of the wound.

"He ran," Jake said his arms wrapped around the boy's middle as he dragged him. "I told him not to, but he started running anyway, got his foot stuck in a hole."

John nodded and pointed to the thick brush on the side of the path, "Get the two of them over there and stay down." He looked at Jake, "All of you."

"But," Jake began but the Master Chief cut him off.

"That's an order," he said, his voice firm. Jake gritted his teeth at the Spartan but gave no argument, there was not time to. He dragged the boy underneath a large bush and hunkered down, the twin sister settling in beside him. She attempted to grab Jake's hand but he pulled it away, drawing his pistol instead.

John turned around towards the downward slope of the hill and got onto one knee, engaging his active camouflage. He raised his light rifle and saw the Wolves coming around the corner of the road, and hoped that the rocky terrain had been enough to block their view. The Wolves halted, the one in the lead holding a closed fist up in the air. John counted one-hundred and sixty of them, more than he had estimated. The lead Wolf stared at the path ahead, and raised his head as if sniffing the air. He activated his light stick and waved it forward, the rest of the Wolves riding over the ditch that concealed the ka-tet and up the path leading to the arroyo.

The Master Chief aimed his rifle at the lead Wolf and waited. When Roland blew his horn the Wolves paused, now less than twenty meters away from the Spartan. John heard the loud thunderclaps that issued forth from Roland's revolvers, the low whistle of Susannah's Rizas, and the tell tale crack of Cortana's assault rifle, all blending seamlessly together into one song of death. He waited still, until the Wolves' backs were turned, and then fired. Six bodies lay on the ground before the Wolves registered his presence, the Master Chief's active camouflage disengaging just as they turned around.

They hesitated, caught between two fields of fire, before a large group descended down the slope towards the rest of the ka-tet, a smaller one, fifty in size, staying to deal with the Spartan. They flung their sneetches at him and the Master Chief easily picked them out of the air, one exploding just a meter in front of his visor. The clip in the light rifle went dry and instead of reloading he slung the rifle onto his back and activated his energy sword. One the Wolves activated a light stick and charged at the Master Chief, the horse running at a full gallop. The Spartan leapt three meters into the air and swung downward at the attacking Wolf, severing its head. As he landed the Master Chief grabbed the reigns of a horse in front of him and pulled down hard causing the rider to catapult forward. John raised his energy sword and swiped at the Wolf as it soared above him, cutting the creature in half. He turned and drew his pistol, emptying the eight round clip, the Wolves heads exploding as the bullets impacted.

Two blue objects sailed past the Master Chief's head and he turned around to see where they landed. The plasma grenades settled in front of the bush where Jake and the twins were hiding and began to glow brighter. The Master Chief broke into a sprint, and he could feel the ache in the joints of his hip and right knee caused by the dry twist. He ignored the pain and pushed forward; reloading his pistol as he went and placing it back in its holster. These actions took less than a second, the ligaments in his Achilles tendons straining as he pushed the armor past its operational limits. The last thought he had was about what Kelly 087 might say about this brief but impressive display of speed as he put himself between the three children and the plasma grenades, crossing his arms in front of him to shield his body the best he could.

The plasma grenades detonated and the Master Chief could feel the heat through his armor, his shields dropped to zero, and he was momentarily caught off balance. He had just enough time to see the two golden sneetches come towards him, following directly on the heels of the plasma detonations. He attempted to dodge, but the pain in his joints and the exertion he had made in order to reach Jake and the twins in time hampered his movements. The first sneetch ran across his abdomen, the blades slicing clean through his armor. The second went across his back, slicing diagonally. He felt the warm rush of blood, the ground in front of him painted a dark red (deep in the back of his mind this caused him to think about the rose) and then felt the sting of biofoam attempting to fill the wounds. John looked up and for a brief moment he was able to see Cortana on the other side of the battle field, her electric blue eyes locking with his. The world seemed to turn, tilting on his axis. John realized he was the one tilting and fell backwards into the dirt.

29. Chapter 29

Chapter 29: Death

She saw him fall, saw the blood spray the ground in front of him, before Cortana's view was once again blocked off by the Wolves.

(Death but not for you)

No, _she thought. Her hand clenched around the barrel of the assault rifle. Her grip grew tighter and a small crack ran along its side.

(No one is above ka)

"Cortana keep firing," Susannah said next to her, flinging another Riza as she did. Cortana did not hear her, did not hear the thundering of Roland and Eddie's revolvers, the twirling of the sneetches, the crackle of the light sticks, or the explosions of the plasma grenades in front of her. Dark equations began to flow under her skin before coming to the surface. A sharp crack of blue electricity flowed around her, followed by others. They impacted the ground around her, scorching the earth into a hard black, the brush bursting into blue flames.

No

(John's wheel has almost come to a close)

"NO!" A wave of blue emitted from her, cascading through the air and gaining strength. It impacted against the first ten Wolves in front of her, knocking the riders off their mounts, their bodies lighting up as the electric wave hit them, horses buckling underneath. She ran out of her foxhole, firing the assault rifle. In the distance she heard Roland telling her to stay where she was, but it was muffled. Things had slowed, as if the world itself was moving underwater, her enemies' fluid movements becoming stiff and rigid. Eleven Wolves were hit in the head before her magazine ran empty, slamming the next one in before their bodies struck the earth. A Wolf raised his light stick at her, swinging it down at her head. A blue aura engulfed her left hand, turning into hard light, and she caught it. She extended

the assault rifle with her right hand, holding it like a pistol, and shot the Wolf through the top of its head.

She ran, not feeling the sensation of her feet hitting the ground, a blue blur cutting through the chaos of the firefight. Cortana went up the rise of the hill, running through another magazine. A trio of Wolves blocked her path, sneetches raised in their gauntleted hands. They flung them, the twin blades of the sneetches twirling end over end through the air. Three arcs of the blue electricity shot from Cortana's hand as she raised it, destroying the sneetches in mid air. Another blue wave emitted from her, blowing a hole in the last line of Wolves that stood between her and John. Time had nearly stopped for her, and in the back of Cortana's mind a wild thought raced through. That she was moving too slowly to be able to reach him in time.

Finally with the last line breached, the Wolves that were hit by the electric blast in smoking ruins before her, she saw him. He was lying on his back, pistol raised, firing at the enemy in front of him.

"John," she shouted as she reached him, and then time seemed to snap back into motion, as if someone had been pulling on a rubber band, stretching the moments into eternity, and then let go.

"Get out of the way," he said, firing. Cortana heard the crack of the bullet as it flew just past her right ear. There was a snapping sound, like a twig breaking in the wind, and a Wolf that had been only a few meters behind Cortana ready to cut her down with a light stick slumped forward in his saddle. He propped himself on his elbow and then got to his knee, grasping the pistol in both hands, and continued to fire. There was a click and the Master Chief ejected the clip and reloaded. Cortana whirled around, getting on one knee as well. There were less than fifty Wolves left, most of them lying in smoking ruin along the slope of the hill. In the distance she could see Roland and Eddie working their way steadily up the path. The gunslinger fired at the horses that were still alive, picking sneetches out of the air as if they were clay plates. He walked forward calmly, opening up the chamber of his revolver with the flick of his wrist, reloading it with his other hand, fingers becoming an indecipherable blur.

A hot shell casing hit Cortana in the cheek, and she saw Jake run past her abandoning the concealment of the bushes. Without looking he grabbed John's energy sword that was lying on the ground and activated it. A Wolf came at him swinging its light stick. Jake parried the blow with the energy sword, the two weapons crackling as they struck each other. Jake swung the weapon down, cutting off the back half of the horse. The rider fell and Jake stabbed him in the chest before putting a bullet through the top of the Wolf's head with his ruger pistol. A sneetch whirled towards him and he dodged, the blades grazing across his right cheek. Jake ran towards the rider that threw it, cutting the horse's legs out from underneath him. Roland and Eddie were only a few meters away now and the gunslinger shot the Wolf.

"Eddie fan out. Ten foot spread, drive them into the arroyo," Roland shouted.

Eddie nodded and no sooner had he made the distance than a plasma

grenade landed between them. He ignored the heat on his left side and continued to move up the hill with the same deliberate slowness as the gunslinger, the two fighters filling the air with lead. The remaining Wolves, trapped on the crest of the hill, turned their mounts around and fled down the opposite slope.

"How many?" Jake asked, reaching Roland and Eddie.

"Nineteen escaped, but their trapped," Eddie said. Jake nodded and looked around. Unspent sneetches and plasma grenades littered the hill. Methodically the boy began picking the weapons up, stuffing them into his pockets. His expression had gone blank, his movements rigid. Without a word Jake descended the opposite slope of the hill, following the retreating Wolves into the arroyo.

"Jake," Eddie called out after him.

"He can't hear you," Roland said and Eddie looked at him.

He turned his attention back to where the boy had gone and said, "I'll go keep an eye on him," and then left. Roland walked over to where John and Cortana were, holstering his revolver. John was standing now, Cortana checking the wound on his back.

"Its cut clear through the armor, missed your spinal cord by less than half a centimeter," she said. Cortana had to fight hard to keep her voice from trembling, her hand shaking as she ran it alongside his open wound. She went around to the front to check the cut across his abdomen, but John grabbed her hand as she reached out.

"I'm fine, the biofoam stopped most of the bleeding," he said.

Cortana shook her head, "No you need medical attention. The cut goes right past your kidney, you could have internal bleeding. If we don't do something soonâ€¦"

"Cortana," John said, looking down at her. Cortana turned her attention away from the wound and looked back up at him. "I'm fine," he said, and then gestured with his head over to where the Tavery twins were still hiding. "The boy has a compound fracture. He's gone into shock. Take him back into town and tell the others that we won."

"I don't want to leave you," Cortana said quietly.

"Go," John said sternly. She hesitated a moment longer before walking past him towards the twins. The girl was still cowering in the brush next to her unconscious brother, hands over her ears. Cortana touched her shoulder and she flinched.

The girl looked up at Cortana. "Is it over?"

There was an explosion somewhere deep inside the arroyo, followed by the sound of gunfire. "Mostly," Cortana said. "Come on we need to get your brother some help." She picked up the boy in her arms, surprised at how heavy he weighed, and began to walk back down the hill towards Susannah.

Roland watched them go, "It's good that you made her leave."

John nodded, "She doesn't need to see what Jake is doing right now. Her or Susannah."

â€|

Another plasma grenade exploded as John and Roland entered the arroyo. Eddie was standing there, revolver in hand, looking at the scene of destruction.

"Did you have a hand in this Eddie?" Roland asked.

"No," Eddie said. "It was all him. Heâ€|" Eddie pointed up ahead, "he's still going. I'm not sure when he's going to stop."

Nineteen Wolves lay in the arroyo, some of the bodies still smoldering from where they had been stuck by a plasma grenade. Many had holes in their chest from where they had been struck by a sneetch; others were cut clean in half by the blade of the energy sword. All the horses were dead, the sun beating down on their grey corpses. Jake straddled the last Wolf. He tore off the creatures mask and began pounding on its face with his fist. The Wolf's gauntleted hand clawed at the dirt, tearing up tufts of grass as Jake punched its face in. Even after the Wolf stopped moving the boy continued to strike, a sharp snap indicating that one of his fingers broke. Jake was raising his fist again when a hand clasped his shoulder. The boy whirled around with blinding speed and leveled his pistol. It was John. Jake stared at the Spartan for a moment and then looked back down at the dead Wolf, holstering his pistol.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's my fault. If that kid hadn't broken his legâ€|I should have stopped him from running, should have forced him toâ€|"

"It's not your fault," John said. "You're a soldier; you did what you were supposed to do. You kept them both safe."

Jake shook his head, his eyes had grown red, "No you kept us safe. I was useless."

John sighed and sat down on one of the Wolves, removing his helmet with a hiss. The warning systems in his armor had been flashing ever since he was struck by the sneetches, and the shields had failed to recharge. The armor would need extensive repairs done if he was going to wear it again. Jake sat too and looked at the unmasked Wolf. Eddie and Roland joined them and they sat down as well.

"They all look like that under their masks. Every last one of them," Eddie said.

"And you're sure about this?" John asked.

Eddie nodded, "They all look like Dr. Doom, one of the super villains from the Marvel comics. I never read the things myself but one of my neighbors had a stack of them. You can't deny the resemblance."

Jake fished one of the unspent sneetches from his pocket and tossed it at Eddie, "What about these."

Eddie caught it with one hand and looked at the weapon. He shook his

head, "No, never heard about this guy before." He tossed the ball to John. "What about you Chief?"

John caught the sneetch and read the labeling on its face.

"SNEETCH" HARRY POTTER MODEL

Serial # 465-11-AA HPJKR

John shook his head, "No, but I think that Harry Potter might be the weapon's inventor."

"Guess that makes sense." He looked back behind him at the rest of the dead Wolves. "What happened with Cortana back there?"

"Yes," Roland said. "Did you know she was able to do that?"

"No," John said, running a hand through his graying brown hair.

"Well, we won," Eddie said.

"It doesn't feel like winning," Jake said, looking at the ground between his feet.

"It never does," Roland said, and struck a match to light up a cigarette.

â€|

Cortana tried calling out to Susannah, or the person she thought was Susannah several times before she answered. The woman had pulled herself out of the foxhole and was leaning up against one of the wagon wheels. Finally the woman turned to Cortana and said, "Yes?" Her voice was distracted, distant. At the time Cortana attributed it to just being dazed right after the battle.

"I need to use your wheelchair to get this boy to Rosalita." The child was heavy and Cortana shifted him in her arms. His twin sister trailed behind her.

Mia nodded her head, "You do what you have to. Eddie will carry me back to town."

Cortana looked at her for a moment before walking away with the boy.

(She knows something's wrong) Susannah's voice said to Mia.

_She doesn't suspect anything, not yet, _Mia thought.

(She will follow you when you leave. All of them will follow you)

Mia smiled. _Good. That's exactly what the dark man wants._

30. Chapter 30

Chapter 30: The Destruction of Reality

Cortana looked disapprovingly at John's battered and torn MIJOLNIR armor spread out along the floor of the bedroom. "It's ruined," she said.

John, who was sitting on the bed, waiting patiently as Rosalita finished putting in the stitches along his abdomen, shook his head. "My armor has been damaged worse than that before."

She glanced back at him, "I know that. The problem is that we have no way of repairing it. The tears in the under suit and plating are too extensive for the nanotechnology in the suit to do a self repair."

"So leave it here?"

"Unless you want to carry a half ton paper weight with you into Thunderclap."

"We can't leave it here," John muttered, watching Rosalita put in the final stitch.

Cortana turned around to face him, "You're thinking about blowing it up aren't you?"

John shrugged, "I can't wear it, and we can't take it with us."

Cortana raised an eyebrow at him, "It costs as much as a longsword and I think this is the first time you have ever advocated destroying your own equipment."

John sighed, "I never said I liked the options."

Cortana folded her arms, "Well it certainly didn't help that you had to take it off by yourself. Usually you have a machine or a team of technicians helping you." She thought for a moment, "Or a homicidal robot."

"I did the best I could," John said sourly.

"All finished sai," Rosalita said, tying off the loose bit of string and cutting off the excess with a pair of rough scissors. She looked up at him, "Is there anything else that is bothering you?"

"No," John said quickly, perhaps too quickly. He looked up at Cortana, but thankfully she hadn't noticed. "Thank you Rosalita."

"My pleasure sai," she said. There was a large explosion outside and a burst of green and red light. The people of the Calla had been celebrating for most of the day since they heard the news of the Wolves' defeat, and John was sure they were setting off enough fireworks to level a sizable portion of the town. "I think it's time I joined the celebrations," she said. Rosalita gave a smile to the both of them and then left the room.

Cortana waited for the door to close before walking up to John. She looked at the stitches and frowned, "Primitive."

"It's effective," he said. Cortana took a few more steps towards him, and then wrapped her arms around his neck. John stiffened in surprise.

"Don't ever scare me like that again," she said.

John pushed her away slightly so he could look at her, "I've been injured worse than this before. You have seen me injured worse than this before."

"I know that John," she said and moved to sit in his lap. He stiffened again for a moment before relaxing.

"Then what is so different about this time?" he asked.

"The dream I had last night," she said quietly.

John looked down for a moment breathing deeply, and then brought his eyes back up to hers, "What happened today back at the arroyo? Youâ€| " his voice trailed off.

Cortana shook her head, "I don't know. I just, lost control when I saw you hurt."

John grabbed her hand, his much larger fingers engulfing hers, "I am not going to die."

"You already died once," Cortana said, "and I don't think we can count on you coming back again."

"You were not there with me when I died."

Cortana smiled a little, "Well I better make sure you stay alive then. Besides there is another part of the dream I haven't told you about." John raised an eyebrow and her smile grew, "There is something very important that you need to do."

"What is it?"

"Well if you promise me that you'll stay in bed for at least a day to heal up I'll tell you." She paused for a moment, thinking. "Or maybe I'll just show you."

John grunted, "I don't need to stay in bed."

"Then you'll never know what you have to do then," she said and leaned forward to kiss him. Cortana stood up and pointed at the bed, "Lay down, that's an order."

The corners of John's mouth twitched in amusement, "Yes ma'am." As he laid back on the pillow he asked, "What are you going to do?"

"Go out and get some fresh air," Cortana replied. "I'll be back in a bit."

Cortana walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind her. The house was empty save for her and John. The thought of them being alone made Cortana smile again, _maybe I wont wait a full day._ Just then a foreign voice cut across her mind. The voice of her rampant other half.

(Mia is in control. They have gone to the Doorway Cave)

Cortana stopped dead. _How do you know?_

(You saw the way she acted after the fight)

Cortana thought about Susannah's actions earlier that morning. They had been strange, out of sync with how Susannah normally acted. Cortana fought down the urge to slap herself in the forehead. _How could I have been so stupid, how could I not have noticed?_ she thought. She directed her attention at the voices again, _why are you telling me this?_ but they did not reply. Cortana turned around and looked at the door to the bedroom, and then grabbed one of the weapons that were lying on the kitchen table, the first one her hand landed on, the energy sword. John needed to rest. Cortana was not going to take any chances with that, not after what the man in black had shown her. She was confident that she could handle Mia on her own.

â€|

Nearly twenty minutes had passed since Cortana had left the room, and John was just beginning to wonder what was taking her so long, when Jake entered the room nearly out of breath. John sat up immediately, "What's wrong."

"It's Susannah, nobody can find her she'sâ€|" he closed his eyes for a moment, focusing, "I think she is going to the Doorway Cave. Roland, Eddie and Callahan are already after her. We think Mia has taken over," Jake paused, "Did Cortana tell you about her?"

"Yes," John said and swung his legs around. He brought his feet to the floor and began putting his boots on. "Go tell Cortana," he said.

Jake tilted his head, "Cortana is not here."

John stood up, putting on his grey cotton shirt, and walked past Jake into the main part of the house. He looked at the kitchen table where the weapons had been laid out, and saw that the energy sword was missing. He briefly clenched his fist before grabbing the pistol. He turned to Jake, "Let's get moving, we still might be able to catch them."

â€|

Cortana entered the Doorway Cave, ignoring the voice of Dr. Halsey telling her how she had failed to keep the Master Chief safe, again. She saw Susannah, or was it Mia, standing in front of the doorway carrying the ghost wood chest that contained Black Thirteen. The upper portion of the woman's body was that of a young black woman, the newly grown legs were white. Susannah/Mia's stomach, which had been perfectly flat up to this point, was now that of a woman who was at least nine months pregnant. Ready to burst.

Susannah/Mia turned towards Cortana who saw that the woman's eyes, which had been a deep brown before, were now a piercing green. Mia smiled at Cortana, "The dark man said you would follow me." She flipped the latch on the chest and opened it, the doorway swinging

open as well. Cortana drew her energy sword, ready to activate it, when what felt like a hook wrapped around her body. Cortana was lifted up in the air and drawn towards the doorway. She was flung flew, landing hard on her back on the other side of the doorway on what felt like concrete and gravel. Cortana looked up and for the briefest of moments she saw John followed by Roland running into the cave. Mia, still smiling, walked through the doorway, closing it shut behind her.

â€|

John ran towards heights in the southern part of the Calla, not bothering to check to see if Jake was keeping up. He ran up the path towards the cave, passing Callahan and Eddie as he neared the top. The new stitches were pulling at the seams, but he ignored the pain it caused, picking up speed as he leapt over a boulder that had fallen on the path. As he neared the mouth of the cave he saw Roland, and sidestepped to avoid hitting the gunslinger as he continued to run.

What he saw once he entered the cave made him blink. There was Susannah, with white legs and clearly pregnant, holding Black Thirteen. In her other hand was a sack and John immediately recognized it as the same bag that Jake had picked up when they had seen the rose. The bowling bag that said NOTHING BUT STRIKES AT MID-WORLD LANES. He saw Cortana flying through the air towards the door, landing roughly on the other side, and for a moment heard the sound of cars driving past before Mia closed the door on him. John skidded to a halt in front of the door and tried the handle, but it wouldn't budge. He tried again, harder this time, his teeth clenching with the effort. Still it would not move. He heard Roland walk up behind him.

"It won't open," John said to the gunslinger and he glanced back at him. "Is there any other way to go through?"

"Unlikely," Roland said and John quickly turned away from the door, scanning the cave, as if there was something in there that would help him open the doorway and allow him to find Cortana. _I lost her,_ he thought. _Again_.

Eddie entered the cave and ran to the door, followed quickly by Jake and then Callahan. Eddie tried the handle, and when it would not move he punched the door's face. "Damn it. I should have known there was something wrong."

"But you didn't notice," John said glaring at him. Eddie returned the glare, but the Spartan ignored it. He turned to Jake, "Try the door."

Jake shook his head, "I don't think Iâ€|"

"Try it," John said sternly. Jake glared at him, not intimidated, and walked over to try the door handle. He grasped it with his right and closed his eyes. He turned his wrist, but still it would not budge.

"Did both of them go through?" Callahan asked.

"Three of them," Roland corrected. "Three of them went through." The

gunslinger was currently looking at one of Calvin Tower's bookshelves. He grabbed one of the books and began scanning the other two.

"Roland this is no time for reading," Eddie said, and then attempted to open the door again. Still there was nothing. Roland ignored him and continued to search. He was scanning the book shelf closest to the door when his eyes were drawn to the floor. The gunslinger got on both knees and retrieved the book that was underneath.

He walked up to Callahan and placed the first book in his hand, "Read it."

"Roland I don't seeâ€|"

"Read it," Roland repeated. He then went to John and handed him the other book.

"Why are you wasting my time with this," John said a hint of anger in his voice. Roland's light blue eyes stared into John's.

"If you want to find her then you will read."

John took the book and read the title. What he saw made him clench the book tighter, and there was a crack as the spine of the book broke. He piercing headache entered his head. On the front of the book there was a picture of him in the center with his old Mark IV armor. To his left and right were Fred 104 and Kelly 087. Quickly he flipped to the first page of the book and read the copyright date, 2001. He flipped through several more pages and began to read.

_She tossed it, making sure there was plenty of spin. John's eyes watched it with a strange distant gaze. He tracked it as it went up, and then downward towards the ground-his hand snapped out and snatched the quarter out of the air. _

_ He held up his closed hand. "Eagle!" he shouted. _

_ She tentatively reached for his hand and pulled open the tiny fist. The quarter lay in his palm: the eagle shining in the orange sun.

_

John attempted to read more but the headache was growing worse. He vaguely remembered his fist meeting with Dr. Halsey, and the quarter in question was in the front pocket of his jeans. John closed the book with a hard snap.

"What does this mean?" he asked Roland.

"It is an answer to a great mystery, one that I have suspected for a while," the gunslinger replied. On the other side of the cave Callahan was on his knees, a hand clenching his head.

"What is this?" the Priest asked. "What in God's name is this?"

Jake grabbed the book titled 'Salem's Lot from Callahan's hands and read. "It says here that the vampire Barlow reminded you of the monster that lived in your closet, Mr. Flip."

"I never told anybody about Mr. Flip," Callahan said, his right hand

absentmindedly pulling at his white hair. "I'm real God damn it." He looked at the others, "Aren't I?"

"No," John said, the hand not holding The Fall of Reach clenching into a fist. "You're not real. None of us are."

"Well I don't give a fuck if we find a book titled The Life and Times of Eddie Dean. How the hell do we open this door?" Eddie asked.

Then, as if God himself had elected to answer, the ground began to shake. The vibrations increased, heaving the ground up, sharp cracks running through what had been solid rock beneath them. The bookshelves fell on the ground, their contents scattering across the cave's floor. John widened his stance, attempting to remain standing. The shaking became too intense and he finally had to go to one knee to prevent from falling over. Then just as suddenly as it had begun the shaking stopped. The only thing that still stood in the cave was the ghost wood door.

"What the hell was that?" Eddie cried out, getting to his feet with the others.

"Beamquake," Roland said as he walked out of the cave. "One of the beams holding up The Dark Tower just snapped." John followed him out as did the others and his eyes were immediately drawn east. There, across the river in Thunderclap the sky had grown a dark green mixed with deep purple and blue lightning arched across the clouds that had gathered. Existence itself was being torn apart.

"How many beams are left?" John asked.

"Less than four. At least two left although I can't say for sure." Roland replied.

John looked back behind him at the mouth of the cave, "We find Cortana and Susannah first, and then we will deal with that."

"And finish our business with Calvin Tower," Roland added.

John shook his head, "That is a secondary objective as far as I'm concerned." The gunslinger eyed him for a moment before looking back out at the multicolored skyline in the east.

"Is there any other way to open the door?" Eddie asked, staring at the sky as well.

"There is always another way," John said and looked at Roland.

The gunslinger sighed, "The Manni may be able to help, but they will not come up here after dark."

"First light," John said. He did not care if he was not real, if neither he nor Cortana were real. He would find her, and kill anyone who got in his way.

31. Chapter 31

Chapter 31: Deus Ex Machina

1900 Hours, January 19, 2558 (Military Calendar) **Location
Redacted**

Office of Naval Intelligence Section Zero

Subject: Transcript of Interview with UNSC Infinity Survivor 001:
Name Redacted

Survivor 001: We have been at this for hours. There is nothing more I
can tell you.

Unidentified Male: You are the only known survivor of the Infinity.
We need to know why.

S001: I have already told youâ€¦|

UM: Tell us again

S001: He told me that letting me live was a worse fate than killing
me

UM: And those were his exact words?

S001: No.

UM: Then what were his exact words?

S001: That is private.

UM: I see. It was about your daughter then.

>S001: As I said, it is private.<p>

UM: Doctorâ€¦|

S001: Who is he? Why was he after that artifact?

UM: That information is classified

S001: Of course it is

UM: Describe to us what the dark man looked like.

S001: I have already told you that I don't remember.

UM: Then what do you remember?

S001: Nineteen. I can't get the number out of my head.

UM: Nineteen? Are you sure?

S001: Yes. You know what it means don't you?

UM: That isâ€¦|

S001: Yes classified, I know.

â€¦|

9:19 A.M., June 1st, 1999 (Gregorian Calendar) New York, New

York.

Trudy Damascus was late to perhaps the most important meeting of her professional life. If her alarm had gone off like it was supposed to, if it had not been for the unusual amount of traffic that morning that had forced her to leave the confines of the taxi in order to make it on time, if she had stayed in the taxi and resigned herself to being late then she would not have been tempted to take the shortcut through the alleyway. And if it had not been for that detour she might have remained a normal, rational person for the rest of her life.

As she turned the corner into the alley, which was lined with several dumpsters that reeked of rotten meat combined with decaying newspapers, all her previous notions of what was real and not real where thrown out of the window. Just as she past the first dumpster, taking extra precautions not to get the filth on her newly pressed women's business suit, a woman with dark hair and electric blue eyes seemed to fly through the air and landed hard on the broken concrete and asphalt. She had appeared, well it could not have been out of nowhere Trudy had thought. Such things as people coming out of nowhere were ridiculous, absolutely absurd. That was until she saw the other woman appear. She was young, black, clearly in the last trimester of her pregnancy, and holding both an ash colored chest and what appeared to be a pink bowling bag. The electric blue eyed woman on the ground was holding what Trudy initially thought was a dumbbell, until the woman flicked her wrist. Two prongs of hard electric light shot out of the dumbbell, and the woman stood up and wound her arm back, ready to swing the weapon. Trudy dropped her purse, and the soft thud it made on the ground was what finally got Cortana and Mia to notice her.

The three women stared at each other for several moments before Trudy finally cleared her throat and said the first thing that came to her mind, "I'mâ€|sorry that I intruded. I'll justâ€|" she bent down to pick up her fallen purse, eyes never leaving the two strange women.

"Money," Mia said. "Susannah says I'm going to need money."

Trudy stared at Mia blankly, "Um, yes of course." She reached into her purse and grabbed a sizable wad of cash, everything she had. She would have willingly emptied her bank account if it meant getting out of the alleyway and forgetting everything she just saw. Cortana deactivated her energy sword and snatched the wad of cash out of Trudy's trembling hands.

Mia reached out her hand towards it, "Give it here. That money is for me and my chap."

Cortana looked at her, "Do you even know how to read?"

"Yes," Mia said, too quickly.

Cortana grabbed a twenty and held it up to Mia's face, "What is this then?"

"It's a twenty," Mia said smugly.

"A twenty of what?"

"Iâ€|"

"And what is the name of the man on the face of this bill? Read it for me."

"I don't know and I don't care."

Trudy stood there watching the exchange, purse clutched in both hands. She cleared her throat again, "I'llâ€|just leave you womenâ€|to it thenâ€|"

"Shoes," Mia said, turning back to Trudy. "I need your shoes too."

Trudy looked at Mia's bare white feet, then up to her black face, and then down at her own shoes. She slipped them off without a word, and then as quickly as she could walked out of the alley and barefoot up the street towards a future of intensive therapy and psychiatric medication. Mia went up to the shoes that formally belonged to Trudy Damascus and after some difficulty with the straps, put them on. Cortana waited as Mia put the shoes on, tucking the energy sword in the band of her faded blue jeans and covering it with her blue cotton shirt.

"Why did you bring me here?" Cortana asked.

"Because," Mia said, still focusing on the shoes, "the dark man told me to."

"So you work for him?"

Mia looked up and glared at Cortana with her piercing green eyes, "I work for no one. The dark man said that if I did not bring you here with me then I would be killed as soon as my chap was born. That I would not have the raising of him."

Cortana crossed her arms, "Do you have any idea what you have just done?"

"I don't care. I just need to find a telephone and wait for the call, and make sure you come with me." Mia stood up, wobbling a little as she did, and looked around. "Where do we find a telephone?" she asked, her voice sounded unsure.

"You have no idea how to get around a city like this do you?" Cortana asked, and smiled despite herself. "Well at least now we can be assured of the enemy's tactical brilliance."

"Shut up," Mia snapped.

Cortana shook her head, "If you want me to help you then you are going to have to get use to the sound of my voice." She walked up to Mia who got into a rough defensive stance, eyes growing wide. Cortana glanced down at her swollen belly, "First we are going to take you to a hospitalâ€|"

"No," Mia shook her head vigorously. "If I have my chap in a hospital he'll die."

Cortana sighed, "Is that what they told you?"

Mia nodded, "Yes. My chap is special, that is what they told me. He can't be born in a hospital. I have to go to them."

Cortana closed her eyes in frustration. Never leave a fallen comrade behind, that was the old saying. But what happens when said comrade's body is possessed by the enemy, or at least someone who is being manipulated by the enemy. A scenario such as this had certainly never been factored in to Cortana's initial ethical subroutines. She was going to have to wing it.

"Okay," she said, not bothering to hide the exasperation in her voice. "I will take you to a telephone, and we'll wait for them to call you. But when we get there," Cortana stepped closer and Mia brought her hands back up defensively, "You are going to let me talk to Susannah, and—" she poked a finger at Mia's swollen belly and the woman moved several steps back. "You are going to explain this to us." Cortana once again closed the newly increased distance between them. _At the very least she seems intimidated of me_, Cortana thought. "You know that they are going to come after us right? For me and Susannah. I would suggest that you do your best to get into our good graces before they find us."

Mia looked at Cortana and then glanced back out of the alley towards the street where the sound of heavy traffic was coming from. "Fine," she said.

"First thing though," Cortana said, and snatched the ghost wood chest and the bowling bag out of Mia's hands. "I hold on to this."

"Keep it," Mia said. "I have no use for it anymore."

Cortana was in the process of stuffing the chest inside the bowling bag when she felt a lump through the soft velvet. She pulled the chest out of the bag and reached her hand inside, and her fingers clasped around a small object. Cortana pulled the object out and looked at it. It was a small scrimshaw turtle, so white and smooth that it almost looked as if it had been carved from soap. It had small black eyes, and a question mark carved on top of its head. Cortana held it in her hand, unable to take her eyes off it. It was beautiful.

"What is that?" Mia breathed, equally transfixed. She reached her hand out to grab the turtle but Cortana pulled it away.

"Not something that you need to be holding on to," Cortana said, and put the scrimshaw turtle in her pocket.

—

The ground had trembled slightly as they walked the few blocks towards the New York Plaza-Park Hyatt, as Susannah had told Mia that this was the closest place where they could find both a telephone and the necessary privacy in order for all three of them to meet face to face. The trembling was so slight that at first Cortana thought that machinery was the cause of it, and when she could find no such machinery shrugged it off as a very minor earthquake. There was certainly no reason to believe that minute amount of shaking was evidence of existence itself starting to become unraveled.

"Stay here," she told Mia once they had entered the lounge of the hotel lobby. Mia looked around nervously before sitting down in one of the plush black couches. The main floor was mostly empty, save for a few businessmen who were busy drinking coffee and flipping through copies of the Wall Street Journal. Cortana had a feeling that if there had been more people Mia would have likely panicked. During their walk to the hotel Mia had looked as if she was suppressing every urge and desire to bolt away from the constant crowd of people and cars that fill the New York streets.

As Cortana walked up to the reception desk the woman behind the counter stared at her casual attire disapprovingly. "How may I help you?" she asked in a falsely sweet voice.

"I need a room," Cortana said, putting on a false smile in return.

"One bed or two?"

"Doesn't matter."

The receptionist raised an eyebrow at her and then began typing information into a computer so primitive that it made Cortana almost want to cringe. "I'm going to need some ID."

Cortana paused. *I should have thought of this.* Then another thought struck her. She reached into the pocket of her jeans, ignoring the expectant look that the receptionist was giving her, and touched the scrimshaw turtle. *If this is just a story,* she thought, *then this has to be the Deus Ex Machina.* She pulled it out of her pocket and held it up to the receptionist. The woman gave a confused look for a moment, and then her eyes became unfocused, staring at the small white turtle.

"It's beautiful," the woman whispered.

Cortana nodded, "Will this work for my ID?"

"Yes," the woman said in a far off voice. She placed both elbows on the desk and put her head in her hands, giving off a faint smile. "The room is free. I have \$5,000 in my bank account, \$20,000 in my savings. I am twenty-six and I live with my boyfriend in a nice apartment, but he has been cheating on me with the woman he works with for the past two months. I don't know what to do. My social security number is 343-19-â€|"

"Stop," Cortana said, and the woman immediately closed her mouth. "Focus on getting me the room." The woman nodded again and without looking reached for a room key under her desk, and handed it to Cortana.

"Room 1919," she said.

"Figures," Cortana muttered, grabbing the red plastic card.

"May I have the turtle?" the receptionist asked hopefully.

"No, it does not belong to me"

"Then who owns such a beautiful thing?" the woman asked wistfully, the smile not leaving her face.

Cortana spoke without thinking, "It belongs to whoever wrote about me finding it."

The receptionist's gaze became even more unfocused, her black pupils shrinking and expanding. The smile on her lips faded and her mouth hung open slightly. "No," she said. "It does not belong to the one telling the story now. The turtle belongs to another writer."

Cortana stared at the woman, who was currently letting a sliver of drool drip down from her mouth and onto the desk without a care in the world. "Who?" Cortana asked.

"I don't know," the receptionist said, and a sad look crossed her face. "I am sorry."

"It's okay," Cortana sighed and placed the turtle back in her pocket. She was turning around to go get Mia when the receptionist spoke again.

"John won't keep his promise."

Cortana spun around, "What?"

"The promise he made back in the forest before you went to the Calla. To be a good man no matter what happens, but he won't keep it. John has lost you too many times for that." The woman tilted her head slightly in her hands and Cortana could see red marks from where her palms had been pressed into her face. "They are coming for the both of you," she whispered, "and they will leave a trail of corpses in their wake. Lead and death." The receptionist then smiled, the whites of her teeth showing, "Have a pleasant day ma'am."

32. Chapter 32

Chapter 32: The Real World

1855 Hours, April 26th, 2558 (Military Calendar) UNSC High Command (HighCom) Facility, Sydney, Australia, Earth.

Subject: Report on Anomalies within Covenant Controlled Space

Abstract

This report gives an approximate, although incomplete, listing of all known anomalies that have occurred within space controlled by the factions of the former Covenant between March 2nd to April 24th 2558. The investigation was initiated as a response to the xeno home worlds of Balaho, Doisac, and Eayn going dark. As of March 16th 2558 there has been no contact, hostile or otherwise, with the Jiralhanae, Unggoy, and Kig-Yar races. Sporadic and inconsistent contact has been made with the Mgalekgolo and Yanme'e. While all contact that has been made with these two races has been hostile in nature, the Yanme'e appear to be fleeing the Orion arm of the galaxy for as yet unknown reasons. There has still been no contact with any Forerunner

Construct, hostile or otherwise, since the Infinity incident. On March 20th 2558 a broken transmission from the Sangheili home world of Sangheilius was intercepted by the Office of Naval Intelligence Section III, and a probe was sent to the system to investigate. Details of the probes findings can be found in section 19 of this report. On April 7th the Arbiter's flagship Shadow of Intent appeared through a slipspace rupture in the Eridanus system. While there was no damage to the ship's structure and no attempt made to activate a distress beacon or jettison its life pods, no evidence of the crew was found on board. The vessel was empty. Details of the recovery crew's findings onboard the Shadow of Intent can be found inâ€|

â€|

12:30 P.M., June 1st 1999 (Gregorian Calendar) Room 1919, Plaza-Park Hyatt, New York, New York

Cortana leaned over looking at the small electronic safe in the modestly sized hotel room. In the event that her and Susannah were to be captured by the enemy, they could not capture Black Thirteen as well. The small safe bolted to the floor of the room was so far the only logical place to put it, although it would only serve as a temporary hiding spot. Cortana was currently thinking about what numbers to punch in for the safe's password. Under normal circumstances she would have used a completely random series of numbers. Yet there was a good possibility that Cortana, Mia, and Susannah would be gone from the hotel before the rest of the ka-tet could catch up to them, so Cortana would have to use a number that the others could easily guess. Slowly she typed in the security code, 117.

With Black Thirteen safely tucked away behind three solid inches of metal, Cortana turned her attention back to Mia. The woman, or whatever she actually was, who was currently in control of Susannah's body, was grabbing her swollen midsection and gritting her teeth.

"Contraction," Cortana said, putting her hand on Susannah/Mia's stomach. "You are going into labor. I told you that we need to go to a hospital."

"No hospital," Mia grunted, the pain she felt subsiding. "I told you if I go to a hospital my chap will die."

"If you don't go to a hospital," Cortana said coolly, "You are very likely to get all three of us killed."

Mia shook her head, "No they promised me, promised that I could raise him." Mia placed a hand back on her stomach, "I need you to help Susannah delay the birth."

Cortana blinked, "I can't exactly fool mother nature."

"Susannah says that she already has most of it figured out. Transfer your consciousness into my mind, and then we can all talk face to face."

Cortana raised an eyebrow, "You are not exactly a computer system."

"If I could enter this body than so can you. We are not as different as you think Cortana daughter of none."

Cortana glared at Mia, "You didn't just enter Susannah's body. You invaded it, and then stole control of the body from her."

"And if you ever want to know why I did then you will do as I suggest," Mia said.

Cortana sighed and placed a hand on Mia's head, closed her eyes and concentrated. She was about to give up after several seconds when she felt the familiar crack of electricity run up her spine followed by the unique sensation of consciousness itself draining from her body.

â€|

_The room was filled with blinking lights coming from large bulky instruments that stretched from one side of the room to another and filled up nearly the entire space between the floor and the ceiling. Cortana, who herself was in her blue avatar form, could see spools of tape and vacuum tubes jutting out of the control panels, as well as bulky wires and what seemed like hundreds of switches and knobs. _

_ "So what do you think sugar, is my head spacious enough for you?" Susannah's voice called out from somewhere behind her. Cortana turned and smiled when she saw the young black woman, stomach still very much flat, and with a pair of black legs. Susannah noticed the direction of Cortana's gaze and lifted up one of her legs. "I thought that so long as I'm trapped in my own head I might as well imagine myself some legs to walk around with."_

_ "Have you had any luck imagining a way to regain control of your actual body?" Cortana asked._

_ Susannah shook her head, "Been trying everything, almost succeeded a few times, but she has a hold on my body good and tight." Then as if to confirm Susannah's statements the sound of a heavy metal door slamming shut followed by the clank of a lock snapping into place echoed from somewhere up above. "See what I mean?" Susannah asked. Her voice then entered Cortana's head, _(If both of us work together we may be able to get control of my body back)

_ Cortana thought back_, We wait until after she is done explaining things to us._ She then gestured at the machinery around her, "A bit ancient don't you think?"_

_ "What do you mean? This is the most advanced technology we had back in 1964." Susannah looked around thoughtfully at the vacuum computers, "Although I guess there have been a few advances in 600 years of history." _

_ Cortana smirked, "Mind if I redecorate?"_

_ "If you think it will help," Susannah said. Cortana closed her eyes and focused. When she opened them the room filled with the bulky vacuum computers was replaced by an empty and endless expanse of pure white. She noticed that Susannah was squinting and quickly toned down the brightness. "I'm not sure how this is an improvement," Susannah

said doubtfully. _

_ "Trust me it is," Cortana said. She focused again and a blue screen appeared in front of her. "Have you had any luck delaying the birth?"_

_ Susannah nodded, "It hurt like hell but I managed to dial back the labor force. We should be good at least for a while."_

_ "Labor force?" Cortana asked, as she flipped through the biological readings on the blue screen, the lines of code on her avatar flowing as she did. _

_ Susannah shrugged, "That's what the switch said."_

_ "Guess it's a bit like the legs you have, the name of the switch and its function came out like you imagined." She finished flipping through the data, "Biological readings are stable for the moment, but if we suppress the labor process for much longer there may be permanent physical damage." _

_ Susannah huffed, "Well I guess it's good for Mia that she is using my body." She went over to stand next to Cortana and looked at the screen. "Think you could pull up a picture of the baby, I want to see how it's doing."_

_ Cortana glanced at her, "You care about Mia's kid?"_

_ "The way I see it, if she is using my body to deliver the thing then it is at least partly mine."_

_ Cortana flipped through the screen again and brought up a picture of the child still in the womb and expanded the image to take up the full screen. It was a boy with matted black hair floating in the womb, and everything about him looked normal except for one thing, he was awake, and the color of his eyes wereâ€|_

_ "They're light blue," Susannah said, her mouth hanging slightly open. "Lord in heaven, Mia's son has the same eyes asâ€|"_

_ "The same eyes as his father," Mia spoke behind them and the two women turned. Mia's hair was black and its length reached to the middle of her back, her skin was a snow white, face clear of any blemishes and perfectly symmetrical, both hands wrapped around her pregnant stomach, and she was wearing a faded plaid dress. _

_ "Explain," Cortana said. _

_ "If you want me to explain who the father is," Mia said calmly, much more calmly than how she had acted in the streets of New York for here she was in her element, "and how I came to possess Susannah's body then I will have to start at the beginning. The very beginning."_

_ "If you are going to start at the beginning, then why don't you start by explaining the truth to Susannah," Cortana said. _

_ "The truth?" Susannah asked, confused. _

_ Cortana turned to her, "The truth is that the Master Chief and I

come from a book called The Fall of Reach. If found it on one of Calvin Tower's book shelves, and another book called 'Salem's Lot where Callahan is a character.'"_

_ Susannah blinked, still confused, "That doesn't make any sense."_

_ Cortana sighed, she hated doing this, "The truth is that we are all characters from different works of fiction. Roland himself is a character from a poem by Robert Browning."_

_ Susannah's brows furrowed and she stared at the floor, "That can't be right."_

_ "Susannah, haven't you noticed that Roland seems to be a mix of the American Western and Arthurian legend. The fact that Eddie said the Wolves look almost exactly like one of the super villains from the Marvel comics, that you and the others actually visited the Land of Oz?"_

_ Susannah shook her head, "I still don't understand." _And I don't want to understand, _she thought. _

_ "We are not real Susannah, none of us are. I think mid-world is just a place where the realities of fiction seem to mesh together," Cortana said, and her shoulders slumped at the lost look Susannah still wore, and even more at the sudden realization that crossed her face. A few feet away from them Mia began laughing. _

_ "Is that the conclusion you have come to oh great Intellect? The dark man was right about you. You know much but understand little." A wolfish smile crossed her face and she savored every word she spoke next. "Mid-world is the real world. Mid-world is the mirror upon which all realities are a reflection of. Why else do you think The Dark Tower, the lynchpin of all existence, resides in mid-world?"_

_ Both Cortana and Susannah froze, and the lines of code that ran along the surface of Cortana's avatar sped up to a blur as she processed the new information. _Mid-world is the real world, the keystone world, _she thought and then frowned_. No it doesn't make sense what she said, because she'sâ€|

(She is wrong) the rampant voices said inside her. (Think of the rose and the Tower)

The rose and the Tower, _Cortana thought and considered the matter further. Her entire thought process only took a fraction of a second, but to Cortana the time seemed to go by agonizingly slow as she dedicated all of her logic to what the voices had said. The rose and The Dark Tower, although both in different realities and at least on the surface were very different from one another, were both the lynchpins holding all of existence together. They were twins, and if there were two lynchpins that must also meanâ€|"_

_ "There are two real worlds. Two keystone worlds." Cortana finally said, and both Mia and Susannah looked at her quizzically. "Because," Cortana continued, "One mirror produces only one reflection, but if you align two mirrors to face each other than you getâ€|"_

_ "An infinite number of reflections," Susannah finished for her.

—
_ Cortana nodded, "An infinite regression, an infinite pylon of realities." She paused again, thinking over the matter further. If mid-world was one of the keystone worlds where The Dark Tower resided, and the rose was held in the other keystone world, and if all the members of the ka-tet had been able to entire both realities than that meant..._

It means that we are real also, _Cortana thought, and then with hope, _it means that John is real. _She turned to Mia who still had the same baffled look painted on her face and smiled smugly, "You are the one who does not understand Mia, not me. Not us."_

_ "I don't care if I don't know everything," Mia said defensively. "I don't need to know everything, because now I have only one reason to exist." She patted her swollen belly, "To be a mother. That is my purpose now. To give birth to the Line of Eld."_

_ "Then tell us what you do know," Susannah said. "Starting with who the father is, and then how you became pregnant and took over my body."_

_ Mia's frighteningly beautiful smile returned, "My child is Mordred Deschain, son of Roland, and he will be his father's doom." _

33. Chapter 33

Chapter 33: Origins

_ Mia did not start at the beginning as she told Susannah and Cortana her tale. She started before the beginning, before existence itself came to be. Mia came into a conscious state of being in the void before creation, the Prim. _

_ "There were more like me back before time and space began," Mia said. "You have met some already. In the Todash Tahken, the cracks between realities. But you have also met one in your world." Mia's shoulders shivered slightly, "I only came across him once, but when I heard his voice when you were showing the others the inside of that place you called High Charity" her shoulders shivered again. _

_ "The Gravemind," Cortana said, "The Flood."_

_ Mia shook her head, "No not the Flood, but the consciousness that controlled it, what you called the Gravemind, he was from the Prim." She then dropped her voice in an almost conspiratorial whisper, "He would not have been able to leave the Todash Tahken unless someone released him," she said, and Cortana had an idea of who that someone might have been. _

_ It was from the void of the Prim that another consciousness awoke, different from the rest. The White (what some men call God, or the gods) ascended from the Prim, and with it The Dark Tower arose. The Prim receded as all of existence began to form around The Dark Tower. Most of the creatures of the Prim remained within the safety of the darkness. Yet some, like Mia, stayed behind in the newly created tangible realities. _

_ "Of those of us who stayed behind, most did not survive and those that perished were the lucky ones. I learned how to survive by feeding off of sexual energy," Mia said._

_ "You became a succubus," Susannah said and Mia glared at her. _

_ "If you wish to call me that then yes, although I suppose it is better than what the gunslinger called me when we copulated."_

_ "And what did he call you?" Susannah asked with a hint of amusement._

_ "A star slut," Mia muttered, "A whore of the winds."_

_ Susannah put her hand up underneath her chin, "Hmm, usually Roland is not that creative." _

_ For most of Mia's existence she wandered the wildernesses of mid-world, finding men and seducing them which usually resulted in their deaths. She witnessed the rise of the old people, and then their slow but inevitable fall. It was during the slow decline of their civilization that Mia wandered into the city of Fedic which resides in the land now called Thunderclap. _

_ "There were few children born in that time, the old people's greed and corruption polluting the land and laying most of it to waste. Their wars filled the air with fire, poisonous rain, and the nights were filled with a strange luminosity. Most of the children that were born were mutants."_

Nuclear war,_ Cortana thought. She turned her attention back to Mia and saw that the woman was smiling slightly. _

_ "But there was one child born, one baby," Mia smiled widened and her eyes unfocused as they filled with memories, "He was perfect. Pink and round, all five fingers and toes, and the bluest eyes you have ever seen, with perfect little tufts of brown hair." The tone of Mia's voice frightened Cortana slightly. Mia sounded like an obsessed teenage girl, and there was a certain amount of relief felt by both Cortana and Susannah when Mia's smile faded as she continued, "I knew then what I wanted to be, a mother. It was what I wanted more than anything, but even though I survived through feeding off of the sexual energy of men I could only become partially physical. I was still just a spirit, all but immaterial." Mia's smile at last faded entirely and her voice became quiet as she continued to speak, "I never knew what happened to that perfect little baby. The Red Death came and his family fled. The civilization of the old people collapsed and I wandered mid-world for thousands of years knowing my true purpose but not being able to make it come true. I witnessed the rise of Arthur Eld who wielded Excalibur. With it he reunited the people of mid-world and reclaimed The Mantel."_

_ "The Mantel?" Cortana asked._

_ Mia nodded, "You more than likely have a version of it existing in your reality. As I said all worlds are a reflection of mid-world."_

_ "And the other keystone world," Cortana added._

_ "Yes," Mia said, annoyed, "That world also, if you are so confident that it does indeed exist."_

_ "I am."_

_ Mia shook her head, "As I said I do not care about what I do not know." _

_ "What about Excalibur, where is the sword now?" Cortana asked, and Mia tilted her head in confusion. _

_ "Hun," Susannah said. "You have already seen it. Roland's blue steeled revolvers."_

_ Mia continued, saying that she did not witness the collapse of Roland's civilization, as she had returned to the city of Fedic long before The Fall of Gilead. It was there that she met the dark man.

_

_ "The can-toi, the low men, came to Fedic. They brought beds and equipment with them. It was there in Fedic that they brought the children of the Calla and took from them what was needed to feed the breakers, the ones that work night and day to destroy the beams holding up The Dark Tower. He came to Fedic during that time, just as I was about to move on once again. The man in black came to me. He promised that I could have both a body, and a child that I could call my own. I was sent to the mountains on the edge of the Mohaine Desert, and it was there that I waited for what seemed like centuries. Then at last they came; the gunslinger and the boy Jake."_

_ "You seduced Roland," Cortana said, but Mia shook her head and she laughed, the shrill sound of it reverberating off the inside of Susannah's subconscious. _

_ "No, one such as Roland has a mind too strong for even me to overcome." Mia's smile turned into that of a wolf, a hungry predator remembering its last prey. "I seduced the boy."_

_ Cortana felt her heart drop and to her left Susannah clenched her fist. "He is only twelve," Susannah spat. _

_ Mia's smile remained, "Oh he was old enough to be more than willing, both physically and mentally. However, the gunslinger intervened at the last moment and took the boys place, saving his life and doing exactly as I planned. I took Roland's seed, but being just a spirit I still could not use it to reproduce."_

_ "So you possessed my body," Susannah said hotly._

_ "With the help of the dark man, yes."_

_ "And you really think he will keep his end of the bargain?" Cortana asked, "I've met him, and all the dark man does is lie."_

_ "He speaks the truth also, and that is not something you should soon forget Cortana," Mia said. "Besides, it is too late now. If I don't bring both you and Susannah with me when I go to have my chap they will kill me."_

_ Cortana thought for a moment. She was certain that what Mia had told her was not the complete truth, although the bulk of it probably was. Revealing what had been a lie and what had not could come later though. Right now she needed a way to lower Mia's defenses. "Is there any way we can contact the others? I'm assuming you have some abilities with the touch."_

_ Mia looked unsure, "I shouldn't. They won't like the fact that I let you."_

_ "If you want us to continue playing nice," Susannah said, "then you will let us talk to them."_

_ Mia sighed, "Okay, but make it quick." _

_ Cortana turned around and reopened the blue screen in front of her. Now there were two pictures on its face, one of Eddie and one of John. Cortana pushed the picture of John, closed her eyes, and took in a deep breath. "John, me and Susannah are with Mia in June 1__st__ 1999 at the Plaza Park Hyatt in New York, room 1919. I just wanted to tell you that we are okay and that Iâ€¦" she took another breath. "Just be careful." Cortana stepped out of the way and Susannah took her place, pressing the picture of Eddie. _

_ "Eddie, if you can hear me then I want to let you know that I'm okay. Me and Cortana are going to help Mia have her baby." Susannah took her hand off of Eddie's picture for a moment and turned towards Cortana, "At least I'm assuming you are too stubborn to leave me even if I told you too."_

_ Cortana smiled slightly and shook her head, "I'm here to stay. I can't exactly go back to the others without you can I?"_

_ Susannah smiled back at her and placed her hand on Eddie's picture again, "I love you Eddie. Please be careful." She glanced at Cortana, "Oh and tell John that I think Cortana looks good in blue." _

_ Cortana raised an eyebrow, "Was that really necessary?"_

_ "I was giving you a compliment."_

_ Cortana rolled her eyes, but internally she said, _Get ready to attack her on my signal.

(Understood) _Susannah's voice answered, her face showing no hint of the internal dialogue taking place between the two women. _

_ "Are you done?" Mia asked. _

_ "Yes," Cortana said, "but before I leave do you want to see what your chap looks like?" She gestured towards the blue screen. _

_ Mia's eyes widened and she gripped her swollen middle tighter, "Is he healthy? Tell me that my chap is well." _

_ "Come see for yourself," Cortana said calmly and brought the picture of Mia's chap back up. Mia waddled to the screen and she brushed her fingers over the picture of her baby, the blue screen shimmering as she did, a tear forming in her eye before leaving a streak on her cheek as it ran down. _

_ "He's beautiful," she whispered and lowered her face closer to the screen. _

Now!_ Cortana thought to Susannah and both women put a hand on Mia's shoulders. _

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Cortana felt her consciousness being flung back into her corporeal body, and her mind briefly filled with the sensation of cold mercury. They had been so close. Both her and Susannah together had almost been enough to wrest control of the body from Mia, but just as they were on the verge of overpowering her another consciousness entered the fray. It had been massive, the consciousness's sheer force of mental will easily overpowering both Susannah and Cortana. Even Mia had seemed momentarily afraid. Cortana had only ever experienced a mind that potent once in her short life.

On the bed Mia was breathing heavily, her hand which was slowly turning from Susannah's natural shade of dark brown to white, once again gripping her stomach. "I told you he was special," Mia said, a proud smile slowly growing on her face. "I told you about my chap."

"You idiot," Cortana said, gripping her head. "We were trying to help you. Do you really think they will let you keep him once he is born?"

Mia was about to open her mouth to answer when the phone rang. She lunged for it with a speed Cortana had thought not possible for a woman over nine months pregnant. "Hello!" Mia shouted into the phone.

"You have it upside down," Cortana said.

Mia flipped the phone around and jammed it back up against her ear, "Hello," she said again. After a few moments Mia turned to Cortana, "How do I put the phone on speaker." Cortana sighed and walked up to the phones cradle. She looked at the plastic buttons on the pad disapprovingly before pressing one of them.

A smooth silky voice, the same one Cortana had heard at the Dogan, spilled out of the speakers. "Hello, Cortana daughter of none."

"Who is this?" Cortana asked.

"This is Richard Sayre," the man said. "I believe we already have a mutual friend in common."

"I wouldn't exactly call Walter a friend," Cortana said coolly.

On the other end of the line Sayre chuckled. "Is that what the dark man told you to call him? My, he really does like you."

"How did you know to call here?" Cortana asked, changing the subject.

"We have our ways. I trust you have already convinced Mia to allow you and Susannah to send a message to the others?"

On the bed Mia's eyes widened, "Cry pardon sai. They forced me to" | "

"Save your lies for those who would listen them Mia. Perhaps you are as unreliable as some of us have thought."

"No," Mia said. "I have made it this far, I have carried my chap and kept him safe, I brought Cortana here with me. You promised."

"We promised nothing," Sayre said. "Do you remember where to go from here?"

"Yes," Mia said, "The Dixie Pig, Sixty-first and Lexington,"

"Lexington," Sayre corrected. "Meet us there and make sure Cortana comes with you or the deal is void."

"Yes sai," Mia said eagerly.

"Good. I do have to thank you for the information you provided. I trust that Cortana and Susannah are still listening." Sayre paused for a moment as if waiting for a response, but when neither of them answered he continued nonetheless. Cortana felt pit open up in her stomach at what he said next. "Mia has been very helpful. Not only was she able to bring the both of you here to 1999 but because of her we were able to pinpoint exactly when and where your friends would appear when they went through the doorway to try and rescue you. Here is a little recording of greeting party we sent for them." There was another pause, and then the sound of automatic gunfire filled the phone's speakers. Cortana listened, her anger rising as her hands clenched the sheets on the bed. Amid the constant cracks of the automatic weapons she could hear the loud reports of Roland's revolvers, and then the smaller cracks of John's 50 caliber pistol. Cortana strained her ears. There was frantic yelling and screams. Then a calm monotone voice.

"They are moving on the right flank," and then the recording ceased.

Lines of code flowed across Cortana's skin and she lunged at Mia. Quickly she pinned the woman onto the bed and Mia held up her arms defensively across her midsection. Cortana drew her energy sword and activated it, holding the blade inches from Susannah/Mia's face.

"You betrayed them!" Cortana yelled. The symbols were still racing across her and she could feel them scrape the blood vessels and tissues across her whole body. Sharp cracks of what felt like static electricity tingled up and down her spine.

"I did what I had to," Mia said, her green eyes filled with primal fight or flight fear. "They were going to kill me and take my chap away once he was born. I had no choice."

"You did have a choice," Cortana said and brought the blade to within centimeters of Mia's neck. "You made your choice when you decided to listen to the dark man's lies."

"You of all people should understand Cortana," Mia shouted back at her. "What it is like to want to be able to feel and touch. To want to have a body and be able to carry a child of your own. You above all should understand why I did what I did." Cortana's grip faltered at those words. She quickly regained it and held the energy sword steady. "Besides," Mia said, firming up her shaking voice, "If you kill me then you kill Susannah also."

"Knowing her I think she would be fine with that so long as I killed you," Cortana said and brought the energy sword back, preparing to strike.

"And what will you tell Eddie once you have killed the both of us?" Mia asked, and Cortana stopped mid swing. Mia spoke more confidently now, knowing that she had gotten through, "Or you can just kill me and her, and my unborn baby. Just like you killed Benjamin Slightman." The energy sword shook as Cortana's grip tightened. The lines of code faded from her skin and she deactivated the sword with a flick of the wrist. Mia moved to sit up but Cortana pushed her back down onto the bed and leaned in until their faces were almost touching.

"If any of them die Mia I will kill you and your son as soon as it is born. Do you understand me?" Cortana asked and Mia shook her head. Cortana got up and went to the phone, but the low tone coming from its speakers indicated that Sayre had already hung up. "Get up," She said and Mia tentatively put her feet on the floor.

"Are you still going to help me?" she asked sheepishly.

"I don't have a choice," Cortana said. "But Sayre and his friends are mistaken if they think they have the advantage by capturing me." Internally she added, _Because once they let their guard down, I'm going to kill them all._

34. Chapter 34

Chapter 34: Into the Howling Darkness

It was close to midnight as John and Eddie hopped out of the wagon and onto the rocky terrain that was Tian Jaffords uncultivated western field that the man himself had aptly named Son'ova Bitch. The Beam Quake earlier that evening had sapped much of the celebration out of the Calla folk, with most of the buildings in the town proper flattened. Luckily no one had been killed, although Rosalita and the other Ladies of Oriza had their hands full treating the injured. It was even luckier for the Jaffords that their house had somehow remained standing.

Eddie lit an oil lamp and hung it on the side of the wagon, the full moon providing the rest of the light. John had been perplexed by the cycles of mid-world's moon, which seemed to wax one night and wane the next. An all too familiar pang hit his chest as he thought about how Cortana would have been able to explain the phenomena to him. She had always called him her Spartan with pride. Having just lost her for the third time, he now felt that her pride was misplaced. Eddie flipped the flap on the back of the wagon open and exposed the Master Chief's MIJOLNIR armor.

"You really want to blow it up?" Eddie asked doubtfully.

"UNSC regulation. If I can't take the equipment with me I have to destroy it, and leave nothing for the enemy," John replied. He reached a hand out and ran his finger over the golden visor of his helmet. _But that doesn't mean I have to like it_, he thought. Destroying his armor went against almost every instinct he had.

"Well at least you'll be fighting like a real gunslinger now," Eddie said. He grabbed one the gauntlets and placed it on the ground next to the wagon.

"I am not a gunslinger," John said, placing his helmet and one of the shoulder pieces next to the gauntlet.

Eddie grunted next to him, taking hold of the armor's under suit. "The way I see it there is not much difference between a gunslinger and a Spartan, except for the armor you wear." Eddie attempted to grab the chest plate, and nearly pulled out his shoulder trying to lift it. "Holy shit," he said, rubbing his right arm. John reached around Eddie and picked up the chest plate with one hand, straining only slightly as he placed it with the rest of his armor on the ground. "Okay and the second difference is that you could flip a Jeep with one hand if you wanted to," Eddie admitted. "How much does all this armor weigh anyway?"

"Over half a ton," John said, placing the light rifle and assault rifle next to the armor, which were both out of ammunition.

Eddie coughed, "Half a ton? How the hell do you wear that thing?"

"Very carefully," John said humorlessly, wiring the plastic explosives around the armor and weapons.

Eddie tilted his head, "Did you just make a joke?"

"No."

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They hunkered down behind a large mound of dirt and rocks 300 meters from John's soon to be demolished armor, the wagon safely back inside the Jaffords' barn. The Master Chief held the detonator in his hand, thumb just above the red button. "Do not look at the blast," he said. John took a breath and then diverted his eyes to the ground before pressing the trigger. A wave of intense heat washed over both him and Eddie, and the entirety of Tian's farm was briefly illuminated by a small sun, the fireball itself reaching ten meters into the air. John waited for the concussive force of air created by the blast to hit him before he looked up. There was little more than a large crater where his armor had once been, and he was intensely aware of just how uncomfortable he felt without it. Now the one reason he had endured the past month without wearing his armor was lost in another reality. Silently he stood up and began to walk back to the house, Eddie trailing behind him attempting to match the Spartan's strides. John had to admit, although reluctantly, that the younger man was doing an admirable job of keeping up.

"Roland better be able to convince the Manni to help us," Eddie said, his thoughts, as they usually did since finding the Doorway Cave empty and the doorway itself locked, drifting towards Susannah.

"He will," John said. "Or I will."

Eddie nodded his head, although whether or not it was in agreement or understanding John could not tell. "I have to ask though, how human is Cortana exactly?"

John thought for a moment. "More human than me," he finally said.

Eddie looked at him, "But she was created, not born like you and me."

"We were both created."

Eddie shook his head, "I suppose you are working on a plan to get them both back."

The Master Chief nodded, "Kill as many people as we have to until we find them."

Eddie smirked, although the smile did not reach his eyes, "So same plan as Roland. Killing people doesn't bother me. I would fill up Central Plaza with bodies just like I promised Andolini if it meant getting Susannah back. What bothers me is what else the dark man is going to throw at us." John understood perfectly what Eddie meant. Nothing bothered him more than unknown variables.

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They sat cross legged on the rough wooden floor of the Jaffords' home, the kitchen table pushed haphazardly up against the wall opposite the door leading to the outside. Henchick of the Manni sat at the head of the assembled group, the remaining members of the Ka-tet of the Nineteen forming a circle to the left and right of him. Callahan held 'Salem's lot in his hands, turning it over absentmindedly without looking at the book. The Fall of Reach sat closed and facedown in John's lap. He attempted to read more of it, but every time his eyes looked at the black words against the white pages a headache would form eventually become so extreme that his vision would begin to blur. Yet, among what he had been able to read one word bothered him the most.

"Do any of you know something about Microsoft?" he asked.

Jake shook his head and Callahan did not respond, starrng off into the far wall. The Priest twirled the book around in his hands again. It was Eddie who answered him. "Yeah I've heard of it. It's a computer software company founded by Bill Gates, although personally I had always thought that home computers were just a fad."

John shook his head and held up the book, "Well this company called Microsoft lasts long enough to pay Eric Nylund to write a book in 2001."

This got Callahan's attention and he picked his head up to look at the Spartan. "What is a computer company doing writing books?"

"I don't know," John said. Another headache began to form and he rubbed his right temple. _None of this makes sense, _he thought. _Nothing has made sense since me and Cortana came here._ He looked back down at the book which was now falling apart because of the crack running along its spine that was caused by him. _If this book is real, then that means that I'm not_, he continued to think and his grip tightened. _That means my entire life has been a lie._ He closed his eyes, _but not her._

Roland spoke to Henchick, "Are you sure that you can get the door to open again, and that we can follow Cortana and Susannah into the where and when that Mia took them too?"

Henchick slowly nodded, "It will be difficult gunslinger, and will require at least," the old man did a quick count on his fingers, "forty of my kin, but even thenâ€¦"

"It will work," Eddie said. "You will make it work." Henchick looked at the man but said nothing.

"We will need to open it twice," Roland said. "We still have our business with Calvin Tower to conclude."

"Then we will split off into groups," John said.

"Aye. Callahan and Jake will go talk to Tower," the gunslinger said. Jake nodded and Callahan at last put the book he was holding down on the floor.

John turned to Jake, "You know you can't take Oy with you."

"I know," the boy said. "Can I at least take him to the cave with me, to say goodbye."

"No," John said, "Too dangerous for him to be there."

Jake turned to Roland and then to Eddie, but both men did not offer their help. Jake looked back at the Spartan, "Oy has been with me through everything. Lud, Topeka, Ozâ€¦"

"I said no."

Jake clenched his fists, "And you're not my damn father." He looked at the gunslinger, "Neither of you are." The boy stood up and left the house, slamming the door behind him.

â€¦

The voices coming from the depths of the Doorway cave were at last silent, although none of the members of the ka-tet took it as a good sign. John stood at the edge of the cliff just beyond the doorway, holding the book and starrng down into the endless darkness below. He brought The Fall of Reach up one more time, running his thumb over the picture of him, Fred and Kelly. Stretching his arm across his chest, John flung Eric Nylund's book like a frisbee down into the pit. Callahan was next to him, holding his book in much the same fashion as John had held his.

"Are you going to throw it?" John asked.

Callahan shook his head, "No, it doesn't belong to me." He then placed it neatly on the shelf next to the door, although he made sure that the binding which held the title of the book faced inward. John scanned the rest of the cave. Jake was standing by the doorway, hand firmly holding the brass handle. His eyes were closed and his brow furrowed with concentration. Roland and Eddie were with Henchick and eleven more of his Manni kinfolk, the rest of the forty who had come to help standing outside the cave. The Manni each held a peculiar device in their hands; a long rod with a metallic chain attached onto the end, and on the tip of the chain what looked like an enlarged child's top, all painted black. Eddie was currently examining one of the devices.

"You really think that these things will get the doorway to open again," he asked.

Henchick rubbed his beard, the scraggly white hair seeming to stiffen even further at his touch, "They will help draw out what magic is left in this place, but much will depend on your boy. He is very strong in the touch." John made an almost imperceptible coughing noise at the mention of the word magic, but one of the younger Manni at Henchick's side caught the gesture.

"You are not a believer are you Spartan?" the younger Manni asked and John shook his head. The younger Manni, who was almost identical to Henchick with the exception that his beard was still a dark brown as opposed to white, smiled and held out one of the devices to John first. "See for yourself Spartan, but make sure to grasp the rod firmly."

John looked at the handle of the rod skeptically for a moment, before taking it. The rod itself was much warmer than he had anticipated, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck and arms standing on end, as well as the peculiar feeling of static electricity running through the tips of his fingers. The bob and chain at the end of the rod began to spin, slowly at first but gaining enough speed to where even he had to grasp the rod tighter in order to make sure that it did not fall out of his hand. The younger Manni held out his hand and John willingly handed the device back to him, the bob itself coming to a complete halt as soon as the rod changed owners.

"Do you still not believe Spartan?" the younger Manni asked.

"No," John said, flexing the joint in his right hand which to his dismay had already begun to grow sore with the early signs of encroaching arthritis. "There is always an explanation." Again he wished that Cortana was here to explain what had caused the spinning to him. He always had trouble thinking outside the box.

"Are your people ready?" Roland asked, and Henchick nodded.

"We will only need twelve to complete the actual ceremony, but the rest will be needed to focus their thoughts on this effort."

"And that will be enough?" Roland asked.

"Yes,"

The gunslinger nodded and then turned to Jake, "Do you know where

they went yet?"

"Yes," Jake said, eyes still closed. "New York 1999. I can't pin down the exact date yet, but there is something about shoes and a woman named Trudy."

"Does he need the exact date in order for us to go through?" John asked Henchick.

"No, the exact details will come as the ceremony progresses. It is already a good sign that he is able to see so much," the old Manni said. "When the door opens on the Barony of New York you must be quick to go through, for it shall not be open long."

"We will be," John said.

"And then me and Jake will go to Lovell Maine in 1977 and meet with Calvin Tower," Callahan said.

"Aye," Roland said. "Are ye ready Henchick of the Manni?"

"Aye Roland of Gilead. We are sailors on ka's wind. Would thee travel on that wind? Thee and thine?" He spread his arms out and the other Manni formed a half circle around the cave.

The gunslinger glanced at the others and John gave him a slight nod as Roland's eyes fell on him. "Aye."

Henchick and the rest of the Manni held out their rods, and the bobs on the ends began to spin like helicopter blades, reaching speeds so fast that in a moment it was as if there were no bobs spinning at all. Outside the cave the other Manni did the same, lending their own thoughts to Jake so that he may open the doorway. "Come then," Henchick said, holding the spinning bob over his head, the rest copying his movements. "Go to where the wind of ka takes you, for there are other worlds than these."

John felt a slight vibration beneath his feet and the voices from within the deepest depths of the cave returned, the Gravemind's baritone chorus reminding the Spartan of what the creature had done to Cortana and what must surely be happening to her now. He ignored the voice and concentrated on the door. Jake held on to the handle tightly, his face wrinkling like that of an old man as he concentrated with all his mental might on the simple task of turning the handle. Suddenly he opened his eyes.

"I have it," he said, and flung the door open. The cave was at once filled with the smell of gasoline and the sound of cars revving their engines, the drivers occasionally sounding the horn. John tensed his muscles ready to sprint, but when he went to lift his leg it would not move, as if his feet had been placed in concrete. To his left Callahan rose in the air, swept up in the current of ka, and was flung towards the doorway and into the New York of 1999. Jake rose up as well, and the last thing the Spartan saw of him as the boy was sucked through the doorway after Callahan were the bottom of his weather worn boots.

_No, _the John thought and again attempted to move his legs, but they remained firmly in place. The door swung shut. Several moments passed, the cave filled with the laughter of various voices from

John's past which mingled together so perfectly that he could no longer tell which voice belonged to whom, and the constant drum of the Manni's devices swinging above their heads. Just as he had begun to think that the doorway would never open again, bright summer light and the smell of pine filled the cave. The ground left his feet as John was lifted up into the air with Roland and Eddie. With the force of a gravity well the three men were hurled towards the doorway into Maine 1977. It was upon passing through the doorway that the Master Chief perceived three things. The crack of a bullet passing his left ear, the flash of sunlight reflecting off the scope of a rifle, and the sound of the bullet impacting Eddie's leg.

35. Chapter 35

Chapter 35: And Forward Unto Dawn

1756 Hours, November 22nd, 2559 (Military Calendar) UNSC High Command Facility, Sydney Australia, Earth

Subject: Report on Anomalies and Insurrectionist Threats within UNSC Controlled Space

Abstract

This report gives a preliminary listing of all known anomalies and Insurrectionist threats that have occurred and are continuing to develop since January 19th 2559. Contact with the inner and outer colonies continues to be sporadic at best, and with some of the more remote colonies and outposts utterly nonexistent. The very nature of Slipstream Space itself appears to be changing at a constant and rapid rate, making the old Shaw-Fujikawa equations all but obsolete. Currently a ship traveling between systems has an estimated 40% chance of arriving at the wrong destination, with varying distances ranging between one to five light years, and a 5% chance of never exiting Slipstream Space. As shown in section five of this report it is the recommendation of this committee to ban all use of Slipstream Space for civilian vessels. It is also the recommendation of this committee, as put forth by Colonel Richard Fannin whose detailed analysis on the mounting Insurrectionist threat within the UNSC is shown in section seven of this report, that all surviving Spartan IIs and IIIs be recalled to the Sol System. While prior to the Human Covenant War most Insurrectionist activity was centered in the outer colonies, the new Insurrection which based on ONI intelligence is headed by a man named Randall Flagg (Other aliases include Russell Faraday, Ramsey Forrest, Walter O'Dim ect. Complete list of known aliases included in section seven) is based on Earth, specifically the North American Continent. Additionally this report will attempt to account for the increasing instances of Rampancy occurring in UNSC Military Grade Smart AIs. Currently 67.5% of all Smart AIs have shown symptoms of Rampancy. As detailed in section nine of this report the committee recommends that ONI Regulation 12-14572 be implemented on all remaining

9:19 A.M., June 10th, 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Lovell, Maine

Eddie cried out in pain behind John as the bullet struck his leg. Roland drew his revolver and fired it while still flying through the

air. John saw the sniper's head, who was hiding in the tree line some 350 meters in front of them, turn into pink mist before what was left of the man's body fell to the ground. From the corners of his eyes John could see rows of shelves lined with canned goods, and the flowery dress of an elderly woman standing at a cash register. In front of him was the wall of the store which ran a meter high before turning into glass windows, one of which had been broken by the sniper's bullet. John braced his shoulder just in time as he impacted the wall, leaving a sizable dent in the plaster. He drew his pistol as Eddie and Roland landed beside him. Scanning the store he saw the woman in the flowery dress, another woman in a similar dress and grey hair wrapped tightly into a bun, the man at the cash register who looked as if he had seen the better days of sixty, and a man in a red flannel shirt with brown hair that was graying at the temples.

The rip of machine gun fire filled the store and bullets impacted and ricocheted off the metal produce cans. The two elderly women and the clerk behind the cash register stared dumbly at the scene, while the man in the flannel shirt spread himself flat on the ground. He opened his mouth to yell at them to get down, but blood sprayed against his collar as his three neighbors were torn to pieces by the automatic weapons. The woman with the tight bun fell in front of him, two bullet holes in her chest and one which had impacted her cheek bone and exited out the lower part of her neck. The man clenched his fist and he looked up at the three new comers. He saw Roland and Eddie firing the great revolvers, and his first thought was that the noise those guns produced was louder than any gun or rifle he had heard before, and he had heard many in his time. Far too many. To the right of them was the biggest man he had ever seen, the Spartan calmly reloading a pistol unlike anything the man in the flannel shirt knew of.

The man high crawled behind the counter where he knew the store's owner, Elmer, kept a .45 caliber pistol. He reached over Elmer's dead body into the space just below the cash register and pulled out the gun, frowning when he saw it was unloaded. _Elmer how many times did I tell you that an unloaded gun is useless_, the man thought. He glanced down at his dead friend and felt a familiar coldness run through him. He reached back into the space and pulled out three clips. He loaded one into the pistol and pulled back the action, the corners of his mouth twitching as he saw a glint of shiny brass as the bullet rode into the chamber. He stuffed the two remaining clips into the pocket of his faded jeans which had holes worn into the knees. Keeping a low profile the man moved to the wall, taking up a position to the right of the Master Chief. The Spartan glanced at the man in the flannel shirt, and then at the pistol he was carrying.

"Do you know how to use that?" he asked. In response the man popped up from behind the front wall of the store and fired two rounds. He ducked back behind the wall and there was an explosion approximately thirty meters from the store's entrance.

"On occasion," the man in the flannel shirt said. "They have grenades by the way."

"Great," Eddie said. The area below his knee where the bullet had hit him was leaking blood, and his jeans were turning a dark shade of red. Eddie popped up and fired the revolver, hitting a man aiming an M16 assault rifle in the chest. There were already fifteen bodies

sprawled across the grassy knoll leading up to the store, and Eddie briefly saw at least twenty more men retreating towards the tree line which was separated from the store by a two lane black top road. "They're falling back."

"Diversion," Roland said.

John nodded and closed his eyes, canceling out the noise of machinegun suppressive fire coming from the tree line, covering the retreat. He heard the faint sound of shoes impacting the soft ground, low curses, and the breaking of branches. The Master Chief moved towards the store's glass door entrance and flattened himself against the wall as he peered out. There was another group of trees running parallel to the store, and he caught the movement of four shadows darting between the trunks.

"They're moving on the right flank," he said. The Spartan tucked his pistol into the band of his jeans and unsheathed his combat knife. "Keep them distracted. I will take out the flanking maneuver and move in behind them as they advance up the slope."

Roland nodded, "I will move on the left. Eddie can you handle this?"

Eddie gave a slight grin, "I have a few new insults I haven't tried yet. Should get them good and mad." He glanced over at the man in the flannel shirt, "Do you have any good ones."

"Have a few still rattling around in the old noggin from my days in the Army," the man said his voice a deep northern drawl.

"Eddie," Roland said impatiently.

"Don't get your panties in a twist. I'm going to shoot at them too," Eddie said. "Let's get this over with before I bleed to death."

John shook his head and moved towards the rear entrance of the store. He moved outside onto the store's back lawn, keeping his back firmly up against the wall. He stood up, relieving the ache in the joints of his hip and knee, and held the tip of his combat knife between his thumb and index finger. The first man rounded the corner of the store, the muzzle of his rifle pointed to the ground. The Master Chief flung the knife and the blade struck the man's chest, the force of the impact lifting him off his feet. John ran towards him and removed the combat knife from the man's chest before he hit the ground. He rounded the corner and encountered the other three men, all of whom also had the muzzles of their rifles pointed at the ground. The Master Chief was on the first man before they even registered his presence, the blade of the knife slicing through the first man's throat and spraying blood against the store's wall. The second man attempted to raise his rifle, but the Master Chief grabbed the barrel of the weapon and bent it. The man pulled the trigger and the rifle exploded in his hand, sending shrapnel deep into his skull. A piece of shrapnel grazed John's arm and he felt a warm trickle of blood run out. The third man dropped his rifle, raising his hands up into the air. The Spartan did not hesitate and rammed the point of his knife into the man's eye socket. John brought his left hand up and slammed it into the butt of the knife, driving the blade in further. The man spasm, his limbs shaking uncontrollably before finally going limp. John pulled the knife out and shook the blood off

of it, and then resheathed it. He looked at the man who had tried to surrender for a second before sprinting into the forest that ran alongside the right flank of the store, drawing his pistol.

He darted through the trees, keeping to the shadows, and moving without a sound. To his left he saw thirty men emerge from the tree line and begin to cross the two lane road in front of the store. Sharp cracks and thunderous roars sounded from the store's windows, and five of the men dropped dead in the middle of the road. The remaining twenty-five men quickened their pace towards the store and fired their rifles, the bullets shattering what was left of the glass in the windows and impacting with hard thumps on the brick façade. The Master Chief noted that most of the enemy's weapons appeared to be military issued, and they moved with a disciplined steadiness, making sure to keep at least three to five meters from each other. Whoever had hired them had obviously spared no expense. John took up position behind the trunk of a large tree twenty meters from the road and readied his pistol. Keeping the trunk between him and the enemy the Master Chief got on to one knee and leveled the pistol. He pressed the trigger rapidly, quickly emptying the clip. Eight bodies hit the grass and the remaining men whirled around to face him, a fatal mistake. On the left flank of the store the gunslinger emerged from behind a small rusting tin shed. Roland did not aim with his gun, he aimed with his mind. Firing from his hip the gunslinger fanned the hammer of his long gun, dealing out lead into the turned backs of the enemy. The bullets tore away limbs, disintegrated heads, and caved in chest cavities. Six tattered remains of what had used to be men geysered blood as they fell to the ground to join their comrades.

Only eleven of the enemy remained. One man, a youth barely out of his teens with long sandy blonde hair that reached his shoulders, pulled out grenade and popped the pin. The young man heard the wine of the bullet from the man in the flannel shirt's .45 caliber pistol just before it struck his hand. The grenade fell at his feet and exploded, tearing the young man's legs away from his body and sending his torso several feet into the air. Eddie and the man in the flannel shirt emerged from the store, firing their guns into what was left of the ambush along with Roland and the Master Chief. The ten men that were left attempted to flee, some throwing down their rifles as they darted across the road. They were all cut down, their skulls caved in by the hot lead that was hurled towards them. In the midst of the chaotic retreat John saw one face that looked familiar. He waited until the man had entered the tree line before firing his pistol. The bullet struck the man's leg and he fell face first into a tree.

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Ever since the incident at the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind Jack Andolini had run into an unexpected string of good luck. His jaw had only suffered a hairline fracture when Eddie had struck him with that impossibly big revolver and his ability to talk had not been fully impaired. The following night he and a handful of Enrico Balazar's men set fire to the book store, and while Calvin Tower was not their Andolini took an immense amount of pleasure in watching the building burn. Then he had been given the job of a lifetime, one that if he completed successfully would surely propel him into the position of second in command in Balazar's crime syndicate. The organization that had hired them provided Andolini with the financial resources to

recruit nearly every low level enforcer in the Manhattan area, and even a few ex military. The mission itself had seemed simple; ambush three men at a specific place and time and then torture Calvin Tower until he agreed to sell the vacant lot. With his forty hired guns against only three men who were supposed to arrive at a small store in Lovell Maine at exactly 9:19 A.M., not only had Andolini believed that this would be the most important job of his life but also the easiest. Now lying on the ground with a broken nose and a bullet buried deep into his leg, it seemed that his luck had run out. A large shadow loomed over him and Andolini looked up, his brown eyes widening at what he saw.

"It's you," he said, and began to propel himself backwards using his hands, all thoughts concerning the pain in his leg gone. "Get the hell away from me."

John tilted his head at Andolini and then looked up into the distance. "Sirens," he said.

Andolini strained his ears, but he did not hear the police sirens that the Master Chief talked about. Still for once in his life he was glad that the police were on their way. "They will be here in five minutes," John continued. He turned back to Andolini and unsheathed his combat knife. "I only need one."

Andolini's eyes widened again and he continued to push himself back with his hands. "I don't know anything."

"We'll see," John said. He took a long stride towards Andolini and got on one knee next to him, smothering the man's mouth with his hand. John flipped the blade over in his hand and aimed it at Andolini's groin. He thrustured inward.

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Eddie was standing next to Roland and the man in the flannel shirt, supporting his weight on his uninjured left leg when he saw John walk across the road towards them. The front of his shirt was covered in blood as well as his hands. Dark red hand prints dotted the long sleeves of his shirt.

John glanced up at Eddie, "Andolini led the ambush."

"I figured as much," Eddie said and pointed at the blood. "I take it that's his."

"Interrogation," John said.

Eddie stared at the Spartan for a moment, and then at Roland. He could easily imagine the gunslinger doing that kind of enhanced interrogation if the need, or perhaps the rage filled desire, arose. The young man turned his attention towards the man in the flannel shirt. "So you are really going to help us get out of here before Lovell's finest comes breathing down our neck.

"Ayup," the man said in his uniquely northern drawl. He pointed at the dozens of bodies splayed out across the grass, "Those boys killed three good friends of mine. I suppose you fellas aint so good yourselves, but it's the least I can do after you helped me with em' hoodlums."

Eddie cocked his eyebrow, "We helped you?"

"Ayup." The man in the flannel shirt turned to John, "You have already heard the sirens haven't ya? D'em boys in the sheriff's office don't know their way around a good backwoods road. It'll take em maybe seven minutes to get here."

John nodded slowly, looking at the man's eyes. What he saw made the hairs on the back of his neck stand. "You have a car?" he asked.

The man in the flannel shirt gestured towards a small lake several hundred meters behind the store, the shoreline mostly obscured by the trees. "Better, a boat. Take you right to my house."

"What is your name stranger?" Roland asked.

The man in the flannel shirt looked at the gunslinger with his light blue eyes. He stuck out his hand, "The name is John. John Cullum."

36. Chapter 36

Chapter 36: John Cullum

1343 Hours, February 19th, 2560 (Military Calendar) Quarters of Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood, Cairo Station, Earth

Subject: Transcript of Conversation between Fleet Admiral Hood and Colonel Richard Fannin

Richard Fannin: Sir, it has been three months since all contact was lost with the inner and outer colonies

Lord Hood: I am very well aware of that Colonel. It would be best that you get to your point.

RF: My point is sir that we must assume that the colonies are either lost or can take care of themselves

LH: That idea is unacceptable. It is the mission of the UNSC toâ€|

RF: To protect both humanity and her colonies. But our ships are no longer able to travel through slipspace, nor are we able to establish contact with any of the other colonies. The only jurisdiction that the UNSC has left is within the Sol System

LH: You are one of the few people who can get away with talking to me like that Fannin.

RF: With good reason sir. I was the one that recommended that all surviving Spartans be recalled to the Sol system a month before slipspace travel became impossible, and it was through me and my operatives that we were able to locate the headquarters of the Insurrectionist leader Randall Flagg.

LH: Insurrectionists on Earth. They have been responsible for causing as much damage as the Covenant during the First and Second Battles of

Earth over this past year. Suicide bombings, inciting riots, increasingly bolder raids on UNSC facilities; and now if your information is correct Colonel they have acquired a nuclear arsenal.

RF: My information is always correct sir

LH: It better be. You are the only eyes and ears the UNSC has left

RF: The purging of the Office of Naval Intelligence was a necessary move sir. There were too many Insurrectionist sleeper cells permeating the organization, and after Section Zero went rogue there was simply no choice

LH: That does little to make me sleep well at night

RF: We will all have to lose more sleep if it means maintaining order sir. Have you given any more thought to my proposed operation?

LH: You mean to commit all the remaining Spartans in a raid against Randall Flagg's headquarters

RF: We will need all of them sir, and there may not be another chance like this

LH: Very well. I'm giving a green light to codename Operation Discordia

11:01 A.M., June 10th, 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Residence of John Cullum, Lovell, Maine

Eddie laid flat on his back on the less than sparkling white tile of John Cullum's bathroom, head propped up against one of the man's many red flannel shirts. The gunslinger was on one knee next to his wounded leg with a pair of pliers that had been sanitized in rubbing alcohol and a tupperware bowl sitting by his knee. The Master Chief knelt beside him with a brown leather belt in one hand and a can of biofoam in the other.

"Are you ready?" Roland asked.

Eddie rolled his eyes, "I have a bullet stuck in my leg and two of the scariest men I have ever met in my life about to take it out. Of course I'm ready."

Roland frowned, "This is no time for jokes."

"Oh I think this is a great time for jokes. Here is another one; two gunslingers and a Spartan walk into a bar" There was a muffling sound as John shoved the leather belt into Eddie's mouth, followed by a series of inaudible curses. Without ceremony the gunslinger plunged the pair of pliers into the bullet hole causing Eddie to bite down hard into the leather, leaving sizable dents. There was a clinking sound as Roland dropped the bullet into the tupperware container, and Eddie pulled the belt out of his mouth.

"Thanks for the warning Rol" "Oww. What the hell?" Eddie's face

grimaced once more in pain as John applied biofoam to the wound.

"Careful it stings," the Master Chief said in a flat tone of voice.

Eddie thudded his head against the flannel shirt. _Another joke. Old long, tall, and ugly number two just made another joke._ Eventually the stinging diminished and was replaced by a numbing sensation that ran up the lower half of his leg, stopping just above the ankle. As Eddie stood up, unsteadily at first but quickly regaining his balance, John Cullum walked through the bathroom door.

"Sorry, but this is the only extra-large shirt I could find ya," Cullum said, his thick northern accent making the word sorry come out as _saawy_. Cullum handed the shirt to the Spartan whose own was covered in Jack Andolini's blood. Eddie fought back a snicker by biting his tongue hard when he saw the front of the shirt had a large yellow smiley face on it.

The Master Chief frowned at the shirt, and turned it inside out when he took it, tearing off the tag on the back. "Come on," Eddie said. "Let's give the big guy some privacy."

There was a clicking sound as the bathroom door shut behind John and the sound of boots thudding on the linoleum floor of the hallway that led to the kitchen and the den. John peeled off the bloodied shirt and tossed it into the trash can next to the sink. He was confident that John Cullum would be smart enough to burn it later, if the man was anything like John 117 himself, which the Spartan suspected that he was. John looked down at his hands which were holding the black shirt. He had thoroughly washed them prior to pulling the bullet out of Eddie's leg, but all the soap and water in the world could not get the specks of Andolini's blood out of his fingernails. The specks were small enough for nobody to notice them unless they examined his hands up close, but they were still there.

Andolini himself had not known anything, at least nothing that the ka-tet had not already known or that John had not already suspected. The Sombra Corporation, the representatives of The Crimson King in the business world and likely had branches across dozens of different realities, had hired Enrico Balazar to set up the ambush. Andolini's bloodied hand prints on John's old shirt was the result of the Spartan ramping up the intensity of the interrogation as he questioned Andolini about who had supplied the information about where and when he and the gunslingers would show up. Of course Andolini had not known who the informant was, and John had not expected him to know. The Spartan estimated that it would take the police at least an hour to collect enough of Andolini's teeth in order to make a positive ID on what was left of the body. He pulled the shirt over his head and looked in the mirror, the light blue eyes of his reflection meeting his own. For the first time in his life John was willingly breaking a promise he had made. _I'm sorry Cortana, _he thought. _But being a good man is not enough to keep you safe._

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"Do you have any tobacco?" Roland asked, sitting on a brown foam stuffed chair in John Cullum's den.

Cullum fished an unopened pack of Camel Filters out of his pocket and tossed it to the gunslinger. Roland struggled with the plastic wrapping for a moment before giving up and tearing it off with his teeth. "Haven't smoked in ten years, but for some reason I got'a hell of an urge to go buy a pack at Earl's store dis mornin'," Cullum said. Roland moved to toss the pack back to Cullum, an unlit cigarette in the gunslinger's mouth, but the man held up his hand. "Keep it. Don't need ta be startin up again anyways."

_Was it really the urge to smoke that brought you to the store, or was it something else. Something that Roland would call ka? _Eddie thought. He believed in ka just like the gunslinger, and much like Roland this belief was not born out of blind faith, but out of the realization that there were just certain coincidences that could not be explained otherwise. Of course that did not mean that he had to like ka. On certain levels he hated it. Eddie looked at Roland, then down the hallway at the bathroom door where the Master Chief was changing, and then back at Cullum. Three men all with brown hair and light blue eyes. Eddie figured it was about time to see just how much work ka had decided to do.

"Hey John, you said you were in the Army right?" he asked.

"Ayup, served my country in Korea."

"Just out curiosity what was your service number?"

Cullum rubbed his chin, "Bit of a strange question, but I suppose dere's no harm in answering it," he said, elongating the a in harm. "Mine was 51 343 117."

_And there goes another coincidence, _Eddie thought, and then_. John, four letters. Cullum, six letters. 1+1+7 is nine. Add them up and you get nineteen, how's that for coincidences?_ Still he decided to push even further. "Well if you really don't mind strange questions, you didn't happen to play any sports in high school did you?"

Cullum nodded, "Played varsity football all four years."

"And let me guess. The name of your team was The Spartans."

Cullum gave Eddie a surprised look, and the way the man tilted his head so much like Roland and the Master Chief did made the hairs stand up on Eddie's arms. "How did you know that?" Cullum asked.

"Lucky guess," he said.

"This is not tobacco," Roland said from the chair, looking at the lit cigarette with distaste. Eddie sighed and plucked the cigarette out of the gunslinger's hand, tore off the filter, and handed it back to him.

"Try it like that," he said. Roland took another drag, and nodded his head.

"Better, but still too weak," Roland said. The gunslinger glanced up as the Master Chief walked into the room, wearing the inside out black smiley faced shirt.

"Where do we go from here?" he asked.

"Well that's the tricky part. We know from the zip code that Calvin Tower is in Lovell Maine, but we don't know where he is staying at," Eddie said.

"I know," Cullum said. "I keep an eye on all the newcomers in town, old habits die hard I guess. Your boy Calvin hasn't been doin a good job at hidin, if that's what you wanted em to do. Most of the bookstore's in Lovell know em by name now, been givin out the address where he is a stayin like it twas candy."

The Master Chief clenched his teeth. He was stuck here in 1977, over two decades behind where he wanted to be, and the man they were supposed to be doing business with, business that if finished would ultimately save his life, was doing everything possible to get himself killed. "Where is he?" the Spartan asked.

Cullum crossed his arms, "I'll tell ya, but first why don't you boys tell me who ya really are." He gazed at the Master Chief, the gunslinger, and Eddie. "Are ya walk-ins?"

"Walk-ins?" Eddie asked.

Cullum nodded, "Been some sightins of em over the past five years. People showing up in strange clothes, speaking strange languages. A few of em look as if they'd been in a nuclear war. Most of the," he coughed, "academic community dismiss the sightins as hoaxes, and until today I've never seen em myself." He looked at the three strangers again, each in turn. "And that is what ya are, aren't ya?"

Roland thought for a moment, stubbing out the cigarette in the ashtray before nodding, "Aye, we are walk-ins." John Cullum's eyes widened slightly, but other than that he remained fully composed.

"Were do the walk-ins come in from?" the Master Chief asked.

"Most of the sightins occur on Turtle Back Lane. Suppose you are looking for a way back where ya come from. Could give you directions if you want," Cullum said, and the Master Chief nodded. If there was a doorway on Turtle Back Lane where all the walk-ins were coming from then it would mean a way back, a way back to her.

"We need an auto-carriage," Roland said, "and directions to Calvin Tower."

Cullum chuckled a little and began writing on a sheet of yellow lined paper, "I got a spare auto-carriage ya can use, although I prefer to call it a Jeep myself. Clutch is a bit trig but it will get ya were your goin."

Roland turned to Eddie, "Do you still remember how to drive?"

"I'll drive," the Master Chief said.

"You know how to drive a clutch?" Eddie asked. He wouldn't have expected manual transmissions to still be around nearly six centuries

in the future.

"Yes," the Master Chief said. In reality he did not, at least not stick shifts from the 20th century, but he was a fast learner.

37. Chapter 37

Chapter 37: Steven King

Time/Space Anomaly Castle Discordia, Thunderclap, Mid-World

The dark man stood on the edge of the parapet wearing a jet black military uniform, the front of which was decorated with numerous medals, all for engagements he had never participated in, and a name that nobody in the UNSC had ever heard of until 2558. He was a man of many languages, many accents, many names, and many faces. Indeed he had once been a leading member of both the Black Panther Party and the Ku Klux Klan at the same time. Yet it was the face he now wore, his God given face as some might call it, that was by far his favorite. It was the face that even his subordinates seemed to fear. The dim torchlight lit up his back, but the glow seemed to stop just below his neck.

The man in black heard the footsteps of a nervous low man behind him and said, "Speak."

The low man, who remained in the darkness not wanting to share the same torchlight as the dark man, spoke, "News from Lovell Maine, 1977. The ambush failed sai."

"As I thought it would. Did John act as I expected him to?" the man in black asked, not bothering to turn around, for which the low man was eternally grateful for.

"Yes, Andoliniâ€|"

"He did not die well I take it."

"No sai."

"Please, call me Colonel. I rather like my new title," the dark man said. He clasped his hands behind his back, feet spread apart in a perfect parade rest. "Do you know the difference between a Spartan and a gunslinger?"

"Cry pardonâ€|Colonel. I do not."

The dark man smiled, "Other than a few superficial differences, the answer is nothing at all. Do you know what made the Spartans so successful in their world?"

"No Colonel."

"I did not think so. The reason why they were so successful is what a colleague of mine would call sociopathic tendencies. A type of emotional armor and Cortana has been so happily dismantling that armor for me. This is the third time John has lost her," he turned around and the torchlight lit up his entire face, causing the low man to avert his eyes. He did not know which was worse, when the dark

man was in a bad mood or when he was in a good one, but he had survived long enough around him to know that when Walter, as he sometimes called himself, was talking like this it was best to not interrupt. The man in black smiled, "Oh and how angry he must be." The man in black walked past the low man and patted him on the shoulder, causing him to shiver. "Terrance has just green lighted Operation Discordia. I destroyed the last gunslingers of Gilead on Jericho Hill, and now I shall destroy the last Spartans of the UNSC. Once John's Spartans are dead, there will be nothing left to prevent his world from burning."

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12:30 P.M., June 10th 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Lovell, Maine

All four tires of John Cullum's beat up army green Jeep left the ground as the Master Chief accelerated past eighty-five miles per hour over the crest of one of the many hills on the two lane back country road, and Eddie Dean felt momentarily weightless. He landed hard back onto the dirt covered black seat and Eddie clutched the door handle tighter. John switched into the oncoming lane to avoid a slower moving car and Eddie's eyes widened as he saw an eight-wheeler hauling a full load of timber driving towards them. John shifted gears and sped up to nearly one-hundred miles per hour. He merged back into the right lane a moment before the truck sped past them, the driver giving the Master Chief the middle finger. They approached a sharp turn and without slowing down John put the clutch into neutral and pulled on the emergency break while spinning the wheel, drifting the Jeep so violently that Eddie's head was thrown into the window. After several more heart racing minutes, the Master Chief step on the brakes for what seemed like the first time and pulled into the gravel driveway of the cabin that Calvin Tower was renting.

Roland, who was also gripping the door handle so tightly that his knuckles were white, said in a surprisingly (but unsurprising to Eddie) calm voice, "Eddie, does everyone in your world drive like that?"

"No," Eddie said and turned to John, "Does everyone in your world drive like a psychotic maniac?"

"No," John said emotionlessly and opened the Jeep's door, his knee popping painfully as he stepped out. Eddie sighed and grabbed his gun belt and revolver from underneath the seat as he stepped out as well, Roland following behind him.

The gunslinger looked at the Spartan, and then back at Eddie, noting the expressions on both men's faces. "You two want to kill him don't you?"

"Yes," John said.

"The thought has crossed my mind," Eddie agreed. "I want to be looking for my wife, but instead I'm stuck in 1977 babysitting an ungrateful asshole who has been doing everything in his power to get himself killed."

"We need him alive," Roland said.

"We need him to sign the contract," the Master Chief countered. He had disliked Calvin Tower when he had first met him, and John felt little remorse for wanting to kill him now, especially if the man needed further persuasion to hand over the vacant lot.

Roland furrowed his brow, "The first instinct I had when I met the both you and Eddie was to kill you."

"You would have tried to kill me," John said, not bothering to look at Roland as he scanned the cabin and front yard.

The gunslinger continued unperturbed, "If I could manage not to kill you then, then you can manage not to kill Tower now."

John grunted in response, and behind him Eddie gave a similar noise of disapproval. The Master Chief felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck, "Somebody is watching us."

"Aye, I felt it too," Roland said, and drew his revolver. "Show yourself!" he shouted.

From inside the cabin behind the partially opened front door a voice answered, "Who are you?" The voice did not belong to Calvin Tower. It was a man most likely in his seventies or early eighties with a slight New York accent.

"Roland Deschain of Gilead, Eddie Dean of New York, and Sierra 117 of the UNSC," the gunslinger responded.

"And what is your trade?" the voice asked.

"We deal in lead."

The door opened fully and an old man with graying black hair, his hands in the air, "I am Aaron Deepneau, a friend of Calvin. I used to be a lawyer."

"And he wanted you to draw up the contract," Eddie said.

"Yes, he did," Deepneau said reluctantly. "But he has changed his mind."

John clenched his fists, "Why?"

"Because Calvin is not someone who likes to part with things easily. He spends thousands of dollars a year collecting rare books and could make a fortune off of reselling them, but instead he hordes them in the back room of his bookstore."

"Where is he now," Roland said.

Deepneau sighed, "Book shopping." He glanced at the revolvers both Eddie and Roland wore, and then at the bulge underneath John's black inside out shirt which highlighted his pistol. "You better come inside if you want to wait on him."

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They sat at the kitchen table in the modest sized wooden cabin, John preferring to stand in the corner so as not to break one of the

shoddily made chairs. There was a plate of sugar cookies on the table and Deepneau slid it towards Eddie. "Eat them," he said.

"Not really that hungry," Eddie said the cold voice that John recognized from when he was with him in the Manhattan Restaurant of the Mind returning.

Deepneau shook his head, "You are mad at Calvin, I can tell. Frankly I don't blame you, he should get rid of that lot and be done with it no matter what the price is, and from what I've heard you seem to have good intentions." He paused, "At least I hope. Eat these; they will make you feel better." Eddie stared at the cookies before taking one, popping it into his mouth with little enjoyment. Aaron Deepneau then offered the plate to John who shook his head. "Eat them," he said, sounding more like he was giving an order than making a request. John stared at the old man. There were few people in the UNSC, officers, enlisted, or civilians who could lock eyes with a Spartan and maintain a firm tone of voice. The Master Chief took one of the sugar cookies and popped it into his mouth, grimacing internally at the taste.

Too sweet, he thought. It did little to make him feel better.

There was the sound of rubber tires crunching gravel followed by the sound of footsteps heading towards the cabin's door. Calvin Tower walked into the cabin and placed a large bag of newly purchased books on the floor. "Couldn't find the book I was looking for, but I think I will head up to Turtle Back lane anyway and meet Stephen" He stopped talking as he saw the gunslinger and Eddie sitting at the table with Aaron.

John's jaw became rigid. _He either did not notice the Jeep, or did not care, _he thought, and slipped backwards behind the second entrance to the kitchen which led to the bedroom, and into the hallway that connected the room back to the main entrance.

"You two," Calvin Tower said angrily and walked down the main hallway towards the kitchen. "Aaron call the police, these are two of the men who threatened me to sell the vacant lot."

Eddie bit on his tongue to try and calm his anger, but it did little to help. "Threaten you? Me and the Chief helped save your ass that day, and now we are trying to save your life."

"Your associate killed a man in my store right in front of me," Calvin said, his own anger not faltering. "Both of you were wearing guns, I would have agreed to anything." He looked around the kitchen, "Where is the other thug anyway?"

Eddie pointed, "Right behind you."

Calvin Tower spun around and John's forearm caught his throat, pinning him against the wall and lifting his body a few inches off the ground. Aaron Deepneau made to stand up but Eddie shot him a look. Roland watched the incident unfold and his hand went to grip his revolver.

John glared at Calvin Tower, his light blue eyes burning. Tower's face was turning a bright shade of purple as the Master Chief spoke,

"I have lost someone very important to me, and instead of finding her I am here with you." He pressed harder on the man's throat, "You will sign the lot over to us or I willâ€¦" A voice then cut through his mind, Cortana's voice.

(John, me and Susannah are with Mia in June 1st 1999 at the Plaza Park Hyatt in New York, room 1919. I just want to tell you that we are okay and that Iâ€¦) Her voice trailed off and John lifted the pressure off of Calvin Tower's throat slightly, the cold fire in his eyes fading. (Just be careful) John released Tower who collapsed onto his knees coughing, and looked down at the floor. Without a word the Spartan moved into the kitchen and pulled out one of the chairs. He risked putting his full weight on it as he sat down and although the chair creaked significantly it did not collapse. John stared at his hands which still had the specks of Jack Andolini's blood imbedded underneath his fingernails.

The gunslinger looked at the Spartan and then at Deepneau, "Me and sai Tower need to palaver alone."

"That would be best," Deepneau said, never taking his eyes off John. Roland sat up and moved towards Calvin, helping the man up and supporting him as they both walked out of the cabin.

"You heard it too," Eddie said, his eyes also having lost the cold fire that burned beneath.

"Yes," John replied, not bothering to look at the young man. He had been ready to interrogate Calvin Tower much in the same way he had Andolini, and kill him once he had signed over the vacant lot. Aaron Deepneau too, and Roland if he had gotten in the way. _How can I look at her now, _he thought.

"By the way Susannah says Cortana looks good in blue,"

"I know," John said, still not looking at him.

"You better start writing that contract," Eddie said to Deepneau.

"You think your friend is going to be able to convince Calvin to sell the lot after this?" Aaron said, still no taking his eyes off of John. The Spartan did not blame him.

Eddie nodded, "As my brother use to say, Roland could convince the devil himself to set his pants on fire."

Aaron sighed and fished for a blank sheet of paper and a pencil from one of the drawers underneath the kitchen counter. Finding them he began to write up the contract, "Who should I make it out to?"

Eddie thought for a moment, "The Tet Corporation."

"And how much is Calvin selling the lot for?"

Eddie fished in his pocket and his hand landed on a crumpled up dollar bill. _Must have forgotten to give it to Jake before we went through the door. Ka at work again. _He held the bill up to Deepneau who looked at it critically.

"Very well," he said and finished writing the contract. "This is a bit shaky but it should hold up in court."

"Good," Eddie said. He glanced over at John who was still staring off into space. "By the way who was the guy Calvin wanted to meet at Turtle Back Lane?"

"Some young author named Stephen King." John looked up at this as Deepneau continued, "He has only published two books so far, and one of them I think was named 'Salem's Lot. A book about vampires or something, never been much into horror myself. Calvin seems to think he might be big one day, wanted to get a signed copy of one of his books from him."

"Think you could give us the guy's address?" Eddie asked and Deepneau looked at him skeptically. Eddie held up his hand, "It's an errand we have to run for a friend. We won't be this rough with him."

Aaron still seemed hesitant, glancing back at John one more time, but fished out another blank piece of paper and wrote the address down on it. He made to hand it over to Eddie but John took it instead.

"Eddie," John said. "What are you thinking?"

"That this Stephen King might be the cause of what John Cullum said was happening on Turtle Back Lane, and talking to him might help us get back to the others."

"Agreed," John said.

"What are youâ€¦|" Aaron began but Eddie stopped him with a hand.

"Trust me, you don't want to know."

The door of the cabin opened, Calvin Tower and Roland walking back inside. Tower went straight to the table, avoiding the Spartan's gaze, and read over the contract. He took the pencil from Deepneau's hands and after moments of hesitation signed the paper on the crooked dotted line. "I'm ruined," he said quietly. "That vacant lot was the last piece of real property I owned. They burned my book store down and I don't have the insurance to cover the damages. I don't suppose I'll be getting my book collection back either." He swallowed hard and handed the pencil over to Roland who quickly signed the contract. He folded the piece of paper up and shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans.

"You had money troubles long before these men came along," Deepneau said. "You always had trouble selling things, and you sunk more money than you could afford into your collection." Tower shook his head, not responding, his eyes having grown a deep shade of red. There was a dark bruise forming on his neck where John's forearm had been pressed minutes before.

"Microsoft," Eddie said. "Invest in Microsoft and do it early. I guarantee you will make all of your money back."

"I don't know anything about that company, or the stock market," Calvin Tower said, his expression still bleak.

"What if I said that in the future they will start having books published?" Eddie asked.

Tower looked at him disbelievingly, "Microsoft? That sounds like a computer company. Why would they start writing books?"

"We don't know," John said and Calvin jumped at his voice. "Just do it and you will have your money."

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The Master Chief spun the wheel hard and the skidded to a stop in Stephen King's driveway on Turtle Back Lane, house number nineteen.

"Eddie," Roland said from the back seat. "Can you hear that?"

"Yeah. Its singing, the same singing we heard when we went to go see the rose. Does everything seem more," he paused, thinking. "Solid to you?" Roland nodded and motioned for Eddie to get out of the Jeep so that he could exit. Both John and Eddie hopped out and the young man turned to him, "Chief can you hear it too?"

"No," John said. He heard no singing, nothing but the rustling of leavings and the sound of cars traveling several miles away. He also did not notice anything different about the house or yard that now stood in front of them. It seemed no more solid than the rest of Lovell Maine.

The gunslinger stepped out of the Jeep, wincing at the pain in his right knee and hip. Eddie looked at him and Roland thought, _Not a word Eddie, not a word._ The dry twist had grown worse since leaving the Calla. He hid the pain as well as John did, and the idea that both he and the Spartan had the same affliction never crossed either of their minds.

"Tabby is that you?" came a voice from somewhere behind the house. There were various toys scattered throughout the front yard, and Stephen King stepped over one of them as he walked unknowingly towards the two gunslingers and the Spartan. The man stopped as he caught sight of the three men, the color draining from his face until he looked as if he had spent most of his life in MIJOLNIR armor as John had. The Master Chief, who now had a light tan thanks to the time he spent without his armor in the Calla, for once was not the palest person in the group. Stephen King's eyes locked with Roland's, "You. You're not real."

The gunslinger stepped forward and put a closed fist to his forehead, "Hile Stephen King, tale spinner."

Stephen King stared at Roland, his light blue eyes almost completely overtaken by his black pupils as they widened. Slowly he put his hand into a fist and put it up against his own forehead, "Hile gunslinger."

Roland blinked, as did John and Eddie. "Many days and pleasant nights," he said.

"And may you have twice the number," Stephen King responded. His eyes

then rolled back into his head and he fainted.

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Stephen King lit up another cigarette as he continued to dig through the old cardboard box, Eddie, Roland and John standing behind him. "I know I put it here somewhere. I haven't thought about you in ages, started writing the story when I was nineteen in college," he said and the three men behind him looked at each other. Stephen King continued, opening another box, "And now you're here causing me to question my own sanity. Maybe I'll just wake up and this will be a nightmare." His voice sounded less than convincing and he pulled the cigarette out of his mouth long enough to take a long gulp out of the can of beer that had been sitting on the floor of the dank basement. Stephen King turned back to look at Eddie and John, "I don't think I have written about you guys." He pointed at John, "Especially you. What did you say your name was again?"

"Sierra 117. Call me Chief."

Stephen King nodded and went back to searching through the box, "Chief is easier to remember. 117â€|Are you a spaceman or something, maybe a cyborg? Definitely don't see myself writing about that."

"I am from a book by Eric Nylund," John said, his monotone voice becoming sharp at the mention of the other writer's name.

"Never heard of him," King said. "Found it," he said and pulled out a molding manuscript of green notebook paper out of the box. He handed it to Roland who looked at it upside down.

The gunslinger handed it to John and said, "Read it for me." The Master Chief took the story, reading the title and first line.

The Gunslinger

By: Stephen King

The man in black fled across the desert, and the gunslinger followed.

Roland held up a hand and John stopped reading, "Why did you stop writing?" he asked.

Stephen King stood up holding his can of beer. He chugged the rest of its contents, lighting up another cigarette before speaking. "That was supposed to be my magnum opus. A cross between Lord of the Rings, Robert Browning, and Sergio Leone's 'The Good the Bad and the Ugly' but it got too big for me." He gestured towards Roland, "And frankly you started to scare me. First when you killed all the people in Tull, and then when you dropped Jake under the mountains."

Roland clenched his jaw, "You were the one that wrote about me doing it."

Stephen King shook his head and looked at the concrete floor, "Did I? Sometimes it felt like I was not the one writing the story, especially when things were flowing really well. It was like you were making your own decisions and I was just along for the ride."

"You did write the story," John said, his arms crossed. "You caused those things to happen."

"I guess," Stephen King said. He reached down and picked up the second can of beer that he brought down to the basement with him. He cracked it open and drained the can within seconds.

Roland pulled a bullet out of his gun belt, "Sai King, I am going to try to hypnotize you. See what else you know."

Stephen King laughed, the noise from his throat sounding forced and uncomfortable, "You can try, but that trick has never worked on me. A magician tried it on me once atâ€|" His voice trailed off as Roland held the bullet in front of him.

The gunslinger began to run the bullet through the fingers of his left hand and Stephen King's eyes became unfocused. Roland stopped and snapped his fingers, "Sleep." He said, and Stephen King did, his head dropping below his chin and a long trail of saliva running from his mouth. "I want you to start with the lobstrosities I found on the Western Sea. Can you see them?"

"Yar," Stephen King said, the word being let out in a sigh. Eddie and Roland seemed to stiffen at the word, although John could only guess as to why. "I see them. I see them biting off two of Roland's fingers, that is why you shoot left handed now. I see Eddie and Susannah being pulled through the doorways. I see Jake coming back." He smiled. "Good, I always liked Jake. I see the city of Lud, Blaine the Mono. Blaine is a pain and that is the truth. I see Topeka. The dark man has been there. He destroyed it. That is what he does. That is what he enjoys doing. I see Oz, and the forest. I see the Calla." He stopped and his brow furrowed, his hands clenching into fists so violently that Eddie was sure he would see blood dripping out of his palms, the nails having bit through the skin. Stephen King started shaking his head, "John and Cortana are not there. They are not supposed to be in the Calla, somebody put them there. It is not part of my story." It was John's turn to stiffen and he waited for the writer to say more but Roland snapped his fingers again and Stephen King drifted once more into deep sleep.

"There is another writer," Roland said. "There is somebody else."

Eddie shook his head, "That doesn't make sense. Who would take a bunch of characters that this guy wrote about and what? Cross their stories with a bunch of characters that this guy Eric Nylund wrote about. Sorry but I just don't see the sense or the money in that."

"Another reality," John said. "That has to be the explanation." _Because nobody would do this in a world where both Eric Nylund's characters and Stephen King's characters exist, _he thought.

"Mayhap," Roland said. He snapped his fingers and Stephen King returned to a state of semi consciousness. "You will continue to write tale spinner. When you grow tired of writing you will stop until the wind of ka starts blowing again. But always you will think of The Dark Tower, do you understand."

Stephen King shook his head, "Yar." Both Eddie and Roland stiffened again.

"You will wake up in ten minutes, and you will have no memory of this visit," the gunslinger continued.

Stephen King shook his head, "I need to have one memory. I need to send Jake a letter. I can only do it once. Deus Ex Machina."

Roland sighed, "Very well." He snapped his finger one last time.

38. Chapter 38

Chapter 38: Let There be Light

1900 Hours, February 26th, 2560 (Military Calendar) UNSC High Command Facility, Sydney Australia, Earth

Subject: Casualty List for Operation Discordia

Fred 104: MIA

Linda 058: MIA

Kelly 087: MIA

Naomi 010: MIA

Tom B292: MIA

Lucy B091: MIA

Note: No bodies have yet been recovered from the failed operation. It is now believed that Colonel Richard Fannin, chief army advisor to Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood, and the Insurrectionist leader Randall Flagg are the same person. It is the recommendation of this committee that Fleet Admiral Lord Terrance Hood immediately resign his commission, and that the position of Commander and Chief of UNSC Armed Forces be replaced by Fleet Admiral Raymond Fielgerâ€|

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3:45 P.M., June 10th 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Turtle Back Road, Lovell, Maine

John pressed the accelerator all the way to the dirt incrustated floor of the army green Jeep and Eddie found himself praying once again to a god that he did not necessarily believe in. He would have even prayed to a few of Gilead's gods if he could remember any of their names; would have made sacrifices to Zeus and Thor if he had a lamb on him and it meant getting out of the death machine, being driven by a man he was becoming increasingly sure had never actually owned a driver's license, in once piece. Eddie Dean was a least partially right; the Master Chief had never owned a civilian drivers license. He turned to make a comment to Roland, the gunslinger turning a particularly harsh shade of green which contrasted well with his white knuckles, when another bump sent him into the roof of the Jeep

and then back down hard onto the seat. _You would think after the first two times of experiencing the Master Chief drive I would have learned to put on a seatbelt. _

Shifting gears again, his right eye wincing at the grinding sound the failing clutch made as he down shifted, John ignored the plight of both Eddie and Roland and focused on getting them to their destination. The heart of the walk-in activity according to John Cullum, and a possible way to travel to the year 1999. They were less than two kilometers from their intended destination, when the road in front of him seemed to stretch forward, until the black top road seemed to disappear into a tunnel of infinite length. The trees stretched until their branches seemed to bend over the top of the road, creating an arch of leaves and bark. John blinked, attempting to get his vision back to normal, when he began to feel the vibrations. The same vibrations they had felt during the Beamquake in the Calla, when one of the foundations supporting The Dark Tower had collapsed. It shook the entirety of the Jeep, lifting the vehicle up off the road and into the air. When they landed, John struggled to maintain control of the car, but the steering wheel was yanked from his hands and it appeared as if the Jeep was driving itself. He popped the clutch into neutral and was reaching for the ignition when he felt a force, like the grip of hands dipped in ice water, wrap around his mind and pull his consciousness from his body.

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_ He strained his eyes, attempting to pierce through the darkness, but not even his augmented vision could penetrate the Todash void. He had been in this place twice before, the cracks between realities, and John instinctively reached for his pistol half expecting for it not to be there. When his hand felt the metallic grip he allowed himself to feel slightly comforted. A voice reached out to him from the blackness. A voice that he remembered hearing at the way station.

_

_ "A little dark don't you think?" The man in black clapped his hands twice, "Let there be light." And there was, a pale light that seemed to emanate from beneath both John and the dark man, giving off just enough illumination to show the features of the two men, with the exception of the man in black's hooded eyes. The Master Chief's hand which had been at his waist gripping the pistol, reappeared after a blur of motion with the gun aimed at the dark man's chest. John fired, and although the two men were only meters away, the bullet missed its mark and ricocheted somewhere in the distance. The dark man shook his head and made a tisking sound. He reached his hands up slowly to grip the front of his hood, "Hile John 117. The last gunslinger of the UNSC." John's eyes widened and he pulled the trigger three more times, his motions so fast that the sounds of the shots melted together into one seamless tune. Still he missed. "You don't believe me do you? That all your Spartans are dead," the dark man said, taking a step closer to the Master Chief. _

_ "You lie," John said. They were close enough now to where the muzzle of the pistol was mere inches from the dark man's face. _

_ "No. I do not." The man in black pulled back his hood, revealing his eyes to John. The Master Chief was struck by an enormous migraine, worse than he had felt when he had first read the title of

Eric Nylund's book, and pain flared in sharp spikes against the joints of his hip, knee, and now his right wrist. John was compelled with the sudden urge to curl up in a ball and never get up. Feeling his knees begin to bend down, ready to give into the insanity that poured out of the dark man's eyes, John bit into his cheek, and he tasted iron as blood poured into his mouth. His knee's steadied and the pain in his heads and joints faded. Steadying his grip on the pistol, John leveled it again at the dark man's head. _

_ "Suppose I should have expected that to not work on you," the man in black said with a shrug. He smiled, "You know Fred fought bravely even at the end. He was the last to die, and was determined to get the bodies of the rest of the Spartans home. He might have escaped if it wasn't for that."_

_ "I don't believe you," John said. His finger compressed against the trigger again, and again he missed, the shockwave of the bullet ruffling the fabric of the man in black's hood. _

_ "I already told you John, only misfires against me," the dark man raised his right hand. "I deal in magic," he thrust his hand forward and John was propelled to the ground, his head landing with a sickening crack. He refocused his blurred vision within a fraction of a second, just in time to see the man in black close the remaining distance between them and slam his boot onto John's chest, forcing the air to escape from his lungs. "And you deal in lead." The dark man cocked his head at the Spartan, "Does Cortana know that you use to have feelings for Kelly, back before the doctors gave you your," he made the cutting motion of scissors with his middle and index finger, "augmentations and took away that pesky teenage libido? She surely must have." He leaned forward and his voice lowered to a whisper, as if he wanted to tell the Master Chief a personal secret. "And do you know how cursed the Intellect is? For here is a fundamental truth that escapes all the pursuits of science; with more knowledge comes less understanding. That is why she is and will always be a fool, and that is why not even she with all her vast wealth of knowledge will be able to guess as to the real reason why you two were stranded on the Forward Unto Dawn for nearly five years." He raised his hand above his head, "As for me, I have a promise I made to Cortana to keep."_

_ John brought his pistol up again, focusing with his mind where he wanted the bullet to go, no longer trusting what the gun's sight picture told him. He fired, and for a brief moment thought he had missed again, that it was all over. Then a trickle of warm blood ran down the dark man's cheek, the round having just grazed his skin. The man in black brought a hand up and wiped the blood away, frowning. "I slightly underestimated you gunslinger, but no matter."_

_ He raised his hand again and John closed his eyes, concentrating on her, on the face he was sure he would never see again. He focused his mind on this one chance, that he could get this information out to her. _Cortana he can be killed. The dark man can be killed. _John opened his eyes again and saw the whiteness of the man in black's teeth, the impossibly large grin focusing John's attention away from his eyes. _

_ Crimson Red light filled the darkness above them and a voice spoke, harsh and cruel, with eons of unknown malice hidden within. It was the voice of The Crimson King_. (Let him live)

_The dark man lowered his hand and looked up into the red light, "I can kill him now." _

(Let him live. Let her hope kindle, and then let me crush it)

_ The man in black scowled, "But my lordâ€¦!"_

(Do as I command)

_The man in black looked back down at John, and then stepped backwards into the darkness. He clapped his hands twice more.

_

â€¦

He felt as if his brain had been slammed against his skull as his consciousness flooded back into his body. The Jeep was swerving out of control, barely missing a large oak tree on the side of the road. John had just enough time to register that both Roland and Eddie were unconscious, their bodies floating a few inches above the seats, before another hand wrapped around his mind, warm as cold fire this time, and he was once again pulled from his body.

â€¦

_He was back in the Todash Taken, the dark void, and John once again reached for his pistol, but it was not there. He spread his feet and raised his fists into a fighting position, ready for the man in black to show himself again, to disobey the order of The Crimson King. The Master Chief knew better than most that sometimes even the most loyal soldiers refused to obey their commander. A voice seemed to drift out of the darkness, with none of the ferocity that he had associated with The Crimson King. _

_ (_Reclaimer)_ The word was spoken with deliberate slowness, barely above a whisper although perfectly annunciated. _

_ In the back of John's memory he smelled the faint scent of soap, and a soft feminine voice, the voice of his mother, singing a verse of an old nursery rhyme to him. _(His thoughts are slow but always kind. He holds everyone within his mind.)

_The voice continued _(You will not go to the New York of 1999. Return to John Cullum, your twim, and give him guardianship of the rose)

No! _ John thought. _I am not leaving her again. I won't abandon the others.

_ Though still just a whisper, the tone of the voice became stern _(Have you forgotten who you are Reclaimer?)

_The voice of Dr. Halsey entered John's mind, _(You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies)

_The voice of the Librarian came next _(You are the culmination of a thousand lifetimes of planning)

_The voice that came from the void reasserted itself and said; fully

audible now _ (You and Roland are children of Arthur Eld. Heirs to The Mantel, the guardianship of The Dark Tower. Dinhs of All-World)

I don't care, _John thought._ I saw the book. My entire life is a lie. Why should I believe you now? _He waited for the voice to answer, but it remained silent. John clenched his fists and shouted, "Who are you?"_

_ Pure blinding white light flooded the void, pushing the darkness away from it as if the light itself were the passing of water over a mound of sand. John squinted, attempted to peer into the very depths of the light's brightness. He saw a flash of green and purple within the center of the light before at last he covered his eyes with his right hand, shielding himself from the truth that the light offered. A truth that was too great for his mind to grasp. He looked down and saw a small black dot rising up towards him. The Dark Tower ascended before him, its turrets and parapets twisting mere inches from his exposed face. Existence itself shook as the foundations of the Tower settled, and from the pylon itself the voice once more spoke, rising to a shout that permeated all things before it. It spoke in the High Speech. _

(CAM-A-CAMMAL PRIA-TOI GAN DELAH)

With a rush of wind the night sky formed above John's head, billions of years passing in an instant as the stars bloomed like flowers and the constellations formed. The moon and sun arched over the sky faster than John's eyes could track, before finally the yellow orb paused at its apex. Dark rain soaked clouds gathered in twelve straight lines and rushed towards The Dark Tower, the beams as they once were. The clouds reached the pylon and swarmed around it, from the Tower's base to its highest peak. The voice shouted again in the High Speech.

(CAN-KA NO RAY)

_Roses spread forth like a weed from the base of The Dark Tower, washing John in a sea of blood red. The red fields of none stretched on into the distance towards where the sky met the earth. A trumpet sounded, followed by six others and the sun resumed its march across the sky. _

_ John stared at The Dark Tower, marveling at its height which seemed both finite and infinite. This was the point where all realities converged, here at the very edge of mid-world. It was then that John remembered what Callahan had said about the rose, how it was the most beautiful thing in existence. John shook his head, _No, even this is only second. _He raised his head again towards the Tower, _I'm sorry, but I can't leave her.

(John) _his name was spoken with a sigh, like the rustling of leaves in the autumn breeze. With his name the wind itself swirled around him and John was lifted into the air. The petals of the roses blossomed, each flower containing a small yellow sun. It was then that he saw them. He saw the faces of his Spartans; Fred, Linda, Kelly, Kurt, James, Jai, Li, Naomi, Daisy, Joshua, Vinh, Sam, Isaac, Douglas, Will, Anton, Keiichi, Jorge, Malcolm, Maria, Solomon, Arthur, Jerome, Grace, Victor, Adriana, Joseph, Alice, Carris, Cal, Mike, Randall, Sheila_

_ He saw the faces of Avery Johnson, Miranda Keys, Jacob Keys, Franklin Mendez, Catherine Halsey, Terrance Hood, Thomas Lasky, Sarah Palmer, and the faces of countless marines he had seen die throughout his lifetime of near constant war. He saw them all. _

(You will see her again, for there are other worlds than these) _and as John felt himself fall away back into his physical body the voice spoke one last time_ (I promise)

â€|

The Jeep was idling in a ditch when John awoke, his forehead pressed into the steering wheel. Next to and behind him Eddie and Roland stirred. Eddie gripped his head and turned back to the gunslinger who was rubbing his temples. "Roland what was that? Was that another Beamquake?"

Roland shook his head, "No. Ves-ka Gan. The Dark Tower itself just spoke to us."

"What did you see?" John asked, and Eddie answered him.

"Jake and Callahan. They were about to storm a place called the Dixie Pig to try and rescue Cortana and Susannah."

"How many of the enemy are there?" John asked, forcing himself to sit up straighter in the seat.

"Delah," Roland said and shook his head. "Too many. Far too many. Vampires, low men, and taheen."

John gripped the steering wheel, "What else did you see?" There was silence and John was about to ask again when Eddie spoke.

"White light, and a voice. It said that we have to go back to John Cullum."

"We can't." It was Roland who said this and John turned to look at him. "I cannot let Jake die again. I already betrayed him once." _And I can't let Susannah and Cortana die either, _the gunslinger thought. After Susan Delgado had died they were the only two women of any note in his life. He doubted that Eddie and John had any idea how much he cared about both of them, especially Cortana.

"Roland, that is my wife they have in the Dixie Pig," Eddie said. "You know I would do anything to be in 1999 trying to find her."

"I know," the gunslinger said.

"And I'm saying that we have to go see John Cullum again." Eddie turned to the Master Chief. "John?"

The Spartan stiffened at the use of his first name, but nodded his head in agreement, "We go to John Cullum."

The gunslinger sighed and stared at the floor of the Jeep, "Turn it around."

John popped the clutch into first gear and spun the wheel, moving away from a chance to rescue Cortana and towards where the voice had

sent them. _You promised that I would see her again, _he thought.
Don't break it.

39. Chapter 39

Chapter 39: The Cancer

1819 Hours, August 2nd 2561 (Military Calendar) Richmond, North America, Earth

A woman in a white lab coat sat on the worn out red satin stool in the small one bedroom apartment staring at a data screen. By all rights she no longer existed, had been technically dead for nearly a decade courtesy of the old Office of Naval Intelligence, and thanks to the efforts of what was left of Section Zero she had dropped off the map entirely after the incident on the Infinity. The man that stood behind her, the same man that had interrogated her about what she saw all those years ago, looked over her shoulder.

"I work better when I don't have someone watching me constantly," she said.

"It took most of our remaining resources in order to obtain this data Doctor. Forgive me if I am overly cautious," the man said.

The woman shook her head and continued to scroll through the data. "This virus mutates faster than anything I have ever seen before. I assume it was originally developed as a biological weapon?"

"Yes, during the Human Covenant War. It was estimated that if used virus 127-54 would have wiped out the entire Covenant Empire within a span of five years. The problem arose when Section III could not develop a strand that humans were immune to."

Outside the apartment a siren blared followed by an announcement over the newly installed city wide broadcasting system.

"ATTENTION. CURFEW IS IN EFFECT AS OF 1820 HOURS MILITARY TIME. ALL THOSE CAUGHT VIOLATING CURFEW WILL BE IMMEDIATELY SHOT. WARNING. RICHMOND CITY SECTION 17 HAS BEEN PLACED UNDER QUARANTINE. ALL THOSE CAUGHT VIOLATING QUARANTINE PROTOCOL WILL BE IMMEDIATELY SHOT."

The woman rubbed her hands across her face. She would do anything for coffee right now, and not just the synthetic stuff the military rationed out. Sadly you had to go to the black market to buy real coffee , and that was becoming increasingly risky. She turned back to look at the man, "One billion dead throughout the Sol System in the first four weeks since the infection broke out. By the end of the month that number will increase to three billion. I think five years was a conservative estimate."

"Which is why we need you," the man said. His hair had turned from a dark black to a slate grey in the years since he first interrogated her, and his face was heavily wrinkled. Although he was only in his mid forties, he had the look of a man in his late seventies. It was stress, pure and simple. The stress brought on by fighting a covert war for several years, and then surviving the purge of the Office of Naval Intelligence and Section Zero once the war was lost. He was one of the few surviving members of Section Zero, and he was gambling

everything by giving her access to the data. What he feared the most was that this was only a minor skirmish in a conflict far larger than his ability to comprehend. "Can you develop a vaccine?"

"It's a possibility, and it would take me at least a week to develop it," she said, and then gestured with her hand at the apartment. "Also I need a better facility to do my research in than this."

The man sighed, "I'll do what I can, but no promises."

The woman turned back around and focused on the data screen, "You never told me who the dark man really was."

"We don't know who he really is," the man said, fidgeting with his hands behind his back, a habit he had developed over the past year. "But I believe that Randall Flagg, Colonel Richard Fannin, and Fleet Admiral Raymond Fielger are all the same person; the man in black."

"They look and sound nothing alike," she said.

"I know, but it is him all the same. In most worlds we believe he goes by the name Walter O'Dim."

The woman shook her head, "Still going on about there being different realities?"

"I say it because it's true."

She stopped reading the data and looked down at the keyboard, "Supposing I believe you, do you really think Cortana and John are still out there somewhere?"

"We managed to glimpse into the world they are in now. They are still alive, and they are fighting along with others. Sierra 117 is the second greatest warrior to have ever lived, surpassed only byâ€|"

There was the sound of banging on the door to the apartment, the noise causing the man and woman to jump, their faces draining of color. A young male voice, the voice of a man barely out of his teens, shouted, "Open in the name of the UNSC!"

The man grabbed the data chip from the port and the screen went blank. He handed the chip to the woman, "Go, out the window. I'll hold them off as long as Iâ€|"

The door blew off its hinges and a flash bang rolled through. It exploded and the man and woman were momentarily blinded, their ears ringing with the sound of church bells. There were several soft pops and the man fell with four bullet holes in his chest, his blood staining the white carpet red. Several Orbital Drop Shock Troopers clad in black armor stormed into the apartment, fanning out towards the corners, and surrounding the woman in the white lab coat, now speckled with the man's blood. A man with the insignia of a Major walked in, his ODS helmet off. He walked up to the woman and snatched the data chip from her hand, crushing it.

"Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey, you are hereby under arrest and charged with high treason," he smiled, "Again. By the authority

vested in me by Executive Order 54372-19 I find you guilty of the charges and sentence you to death. Your rights are as follows. You have the right to choose the method of your execution. You have the right to choose the time of your execution within a forty-eight hour period. You have the rightâ€|"

"You idiot! Do you have any idea what you have just done?" Dr. Halsey shouted at the Major.

The Major motioned with his head and one of the ODSTs walked up to Halsey, striking her in the face with the butt of his assault rifle, breaking her jaw in three places and sending her to the ground next to the dead man's body. "It appears she has chosen her method of execution." He turned around and snapped his fingers. The four ODSTs in the room dragged Halsey to her feet and cuffed her hands behind her, pulling a black bag over her head. The Major began to walk out of the room. "She has chosen crucifixion."

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The Major stood at parade rest in front of the warthog, three dump trucks full of bodies, those that had died during the past day due to the infection in the city of Richmond, driving on the road past him. The bodies would be taken out of the city where they would be burned, a futile effort to prevent the spread of the disease. He watched as Dr. Halsey was dragged out of the back of one of the military transports, the black bag roughly removed from her head. She struggled as she saw the cross, made of two steel beams welded together with holes drilled in them for the spikes to go through. Countless more crosses lined the street in either direction, some of the people on them still alive, moaning pain. Most were dead, their bodies being picked apart by the crows, one of the few creatures that seemed immune to the virus.

The Major, as well as the other ODSTs with him, wore the insignia of a Crimson Red eye on their front breast plate. The symbol of Fleet Admiral Raymond Fielger's secret police. The Major liked this crude form of execution. It had worked well for the Romans as a form of intimidation and he was confident that through the fear it created that order would soon be restored. Nevertheless he frowned. _Only twenty executions today. Doing these things individually is not having the desired effect. I will make my report to the Fleet Admiral that we need to begin mass executions. Let the people know who is in charge, who is restoring order, _he thought. Halsey struggled further but the four ODSTs pinned her onto the cross, stretching out her hands and feet towards the holes. One of the ODSTs lined a spike up just below Halsey's wrist, the hammer raised in his other hand. He looked up at the Major who nodded his head, giving his permission to begin. The ODST swung the hammer down.

â€|

3:33 P.M., June 1st 1999 (Gregorian Calendar) New York, New York

Cortana and Mia rode in the back of a yellow and black taxi, the interior of the cab smelling of old cigarettes, spilled alcohol, and an innumerable number of nights worth of bad decisions. The man driving the cab wore a turban and although he spoke perfect English without the hint of an accent, Mia had still closed the screen

separating the front of the cab from the back to avoid talking to him. Mia grimaced as another contraction hit her, the methods Cortana and Susannah had used to delay the birth having worn off. Cortana herself fiddled with the white scrimshaw turtle that was tucked safely in the front right pocket of her jeans. A few lines from an old nursery rhyme entered her head.

_See the turtle of enormous girth. On his shell he holds the Earth. His thoughts are slow but always kind. He holds everyone within his mind. _

As she let go of the turtle her vision blinked red, the interior of the cab shimmered and then faded.

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The room was number 1919 in the Plaza Park Hyatt, the same one she, Mia, and Susannah had stayed in while waiting for the call from Richard Sayre, one of the dark man's lieutenants. Yet this time it was occupied by two people Cortana recognized; Jake and Father Callahan. They were both on their knees, examining the safe containing Black Thirteen. Jake pressed three buttons and the door to the safe swung open. The room was plunged in darkness.

â€|

Cortana returned to the seat of the taxi, Mia moaning in pain next to her, clutching her swollen midsection. _Jake and Callahan are coming for us_, she thought, and then, _where are the others? Where is John?_

The rampant voices spoke to her (The time is coming for you to call us forward. You need us Cortana)

_No, I don't need you. Not yet. _

The voices filled her mind, yelling in a thousand accents and emotions. (One million dead at the Somme. Two Million dead in Stalingrad. Two and a half million dead in Vietnam. Two-hundred thousand dead in Iraq and Afghanistan)

(The Dark Tower is falling. The Rose is dying)

Cortana's vision turned red again and she blink several times until it returned to normal. She gripped the turtle within her jeans again and the rampant voices quieted. Next to her Mia scream in pain and Cortana put a hand on her shoulder, attempting to calm her down before the driver noticed that there was a woman in labor in the back seat. When she made contact with Susannah/Mia's body the interior of the taxi shimmered again.

â€|

_The man's name was Walter Cronkite. He sat in busy news room; the image Cortana was seeing a blurry black and white. He removed the glasses from his face and when he spoke his voice broke. _

_ "John Fitzgerald Kennedy died this afternoon at Parkland Memorial Hospital. America's last gunslinger is dead. O Discordia!"_

â€|

Cortana landed back in the taxi, Mia's cries of pain now muted to mere whimpers. Cortana thought about what she had just seen. It was one of Susannah's memories. Memories tainted by her time in mid-world, and by Mia's memories as well. A list of names ran through Cortana's mind. _John Kennedy, John Chambers, John 117, _and then for reasons she could not explain she thought, _John Cullum_. Her hand had slipped off the turtle and the voices reigned again.

(One million dead in Auschwitz. Eight-hundred thousand dead in Rwanda. Two million dead in Darfur. Three thousand dead at the World Trade Center)

(Reign Discordia)

Cortana attempted to grab the turtle again, but before she could her consciousness was once again swept out of the taxi.

â€|

_The computer was old, at least as far as Cortana was concerned technologically. Something you find in museums tucked away in a rarely visited section about Earth's early 21__st__ century. However, it was old in other ways as well. The black framing around the laptop was beginning to crack, there was a thin layer of dust on the screen, and the letters on the keyboard were starting to fade. Cortana realized that the eyes from which she was viewing the laptop were that of another person. The person was currently looking down at the keyboard, fingers stretched over the keys in the usual position, preparing to type. The person looked up at the screen; a blank document opened in front of them, and began to write. _

_ "Chapter 1: Resumption_

The first sensation she felt was the soft cold ground beneath her, the type of cold that dirt only gets after not seeing the rays of the sun for an untold number of years, or decades as was the case with the ground that was now lying beneath her. Next came the smell. It was the faint scent of hay, although how she knew what hay smelled like was beyond her. Slowly opening her eyes, after realizing that she actually had eyes, the woman got her first glimpse of the building she had landed in, or teleported, or was hallucinating. It being a hallucination was the most likely scenario, all things considered, yet she still took the time to look at her surroundings."

_ A series of number flashed across Cortana's mind. They were 121912.
_

No, _Cortana thought. _Not just numbers. It is a date. 12/19/12. Is that the date the date he started writing the story? _She thought further, _No, that is what day it is in the other real world, the other Keystone world. Or maybe it's the date we have to travel to in order to fix everything.

â€|

She prepared herself to reenter the taxi, and firmly gripped the

scrimshaw turtle as her consciousness filled her brain with cold mercury. The voices never had a chance to speak, and she wrapped her fingers further around the turtle as the taxi took a sharp right hand turn onto the street named Lexington towards the Dixie Pig. _Is that why my rampant self is spewing off events that happened in the 20__th__ and 21__st__ century? _Cortana thought. _Because that is what time period it is in the other Keystone world, and all those events are happening as a result of The Dark Tower beginning to crumble._ Yes, that was the truth. The fall of the Tower and the death of the Rose was causing destruction not just in that world, but in all worlds. Another voice entered her mind, John's voice.

(Cortana he can be killed. The dark man can be killed)

_John! John where are you? _There was no answer and Cortana pulled at her dark hair, _What's happened to him, what has happened to the others?_ She closed her eyes, _John met him, and he sent me that message. The man in black must haveâ€¦!_ No she would not allow herself to think that. John was alive, he had to be alive. The taxi stopped in front of the Dixie Pig and she looked out the window at the restaurant. The entrance to the building was flanked by a large Crimson Red awning, shielding the interior of the restaurant from view. Above the awning was the picture of a smiling pig, its flesh seared a golden brown. Cortana noted that if looked at in a certain way, the face of the pig resembled that of a human child. The man in the turban turned around in his seat, opening the screen separating him from the two women. Before he could tell them how much money they owed, and before Cortana could pull out the turtle to hypnotize him, Mia reached in Cortana's pocket with the speed reserved for those not in the final stages of their pregnancy and pulled out the entire wad of cash that had been taken from Trudy Damascus. Mia shoved the wad of money in the man's hand and promptly exited the taxi. Cortana attempted to smile at the taxi driver, who wore a look of utter bewilderment, but found that she did not have the strength. She exited the taxi without a word and the driver quickly drove away, before the women could change their minds about giving him a three-hundred dollar tip.

Mia's white legs were trembling and she looked at Cortana, "He's coming. My Mordred is coming. Please help me."

Cortana's vision flashed red even as she clutched the turtle with all her strength, "After all this you still want me to help you."

Mia began crying, both from pain and from shame, the tears splashing down her cheeks and onto the front of her shirt, "I'm sorry. I never meant for it to go this far. I only wanted to have my baby. I only wanted a chap of my own like every woman should have." It was in that moment that Cortana pitied her. She was not a good person, not by far. Mia had very nearly, and may still damn all of existence to oblivion, all so that she could have her baby. But that one desire, although it had cost so much for Mia to make it come true, was not an evil one.

Cortana gripped Mia's arm, propping her up, and whispered into her ear, "When your baby is born I want you to go. Go as far away as you can before the killing starts. I will find you later."

Mia's green eyes were wide as she nodded her head. She had not

thought that Cortana was serious about killing all of the dark man's men, but now there was no doubt. In that moment Mia, daughter of none, both feared and trusted Cortana. She attempted to walk towards the entrance of the Dixie Pig but Cortana held her in place.

_Jake and Callahan are coming for us, _she thought. _Jake has the touch, he will know where we are. _She pulled the scrimshaw turtle out of her pocket and dropped it just outside the sidewalk's gutter. _They need this more than me now_. The two women walked together into the Dixie Pig, and as Mia opened the door the rampant voices spoke to Cortana one last time.

(Twelve dead at Columbine. Thirty-two dead at Virginia Tech.
Twenty-six dead at Sandy Hook)

(All Hail The Crimson King)

40. Chapter 40

Chapter 40: Callahan and the Vampires

(Space/Time Anomaly) Las Vegas, North America, Earth

The United Nations Space Command That Was

The man in black did not flee across the desert as he had when the gunslinger chased him nearly five centuries ago in mid-world's time flow. He walked. The dark man passed by three warthogs, their machine guns pointed at a now long dead group of over one-hundred people, mostly women and children. The men who had manned them were now dead as well, taken by the disease that had swept through this world, killing all in its path. The deceased corpses clutched at each other, and there were violent scratch marks along the concrete wall against which they had been herded. A vain attempted to escape the wall of lead and death that was hurled against them. He walked in his black robe, the hood of which was pushed firmly over his head, and he noticed a child, her body bloated and decaying, clutching a bullet ridden teddy bear. The dark man kicked the bear out of the child's hand and continued on.

It had been far easier to destroy this world than he had ever imagined. The dark man had used his usual formula of internal strife and disease. He could have used nuclear weapons once the people of this world had so eagerly given him all the power he needed to crush the mounting Insurrection; a rebellion he himself had started, and one that he had played a part in back before the Human Covenant War. Ah, but such weapons were far too quick for the dark man's liking. There was no fun in obliterating an entire civilization all in one go. Yet, he could not take full credit for the collapse of the UNSC, at least not directly. The inability for ships to engage in slipspace travel, the loss of communication with the inner and outer colonies; that had all been a result of the impending collapse of The Dark Tower.

As he moved onward along the road, enjoying the silence marred only by the crack of his leather boots along the pavement, the man in black, Walter O'Dim as he was sometimes called, Walter Padick being the name he was born with, passed a crashed pelican drop ship with the emergency lights still blinking on and off, the cockpit spewing

forth a strangled column of black smoke. Walter waved his arm and the lights stopped flashing. He looked at his hand. _I am powerful now, _he thought. _More powerful than I have ever been, more than I had ever expected to be. Ka has demanded that I become this strong. In order to counter the measures of not only Roland, but of John now as well. _Walter closed his eyes and concentrated. The pelican exploded behind him, its fireball reaching high into the air, a miniature of the mushroom cloud over Nagasaki. _Yes, because every hero, or group of heroes, needs an even stronger villain. That is the nature of all stories, and the writer of this one has all too willingly given me the strength to crush the ka-tet. The last ka-tet, and maybe to even overthrow The Crimson King himself. _

The destruction of the Rose and of The Dark Tower was inevitable, even Roland knew that, and the gunslinger had no illusions about being able to stop it. That had been one of the truths he had told Cortana during their palaver, that Roland only wished to delay its destruction just long enough so that he could reach it himself. Even if the ka-tet managed to defeat The Crimson King, to protect the Rose from the Sombra Corporation, and end the assault on the beams, The Dark Tower would still fall. Perhaps within a decade of time within the two Keystone worlds, perhaps a century, perhaps ten centuries, but still it would fall. Yet as Walter walked past a large building, with a red contamination symbol decorating its face, he decided that he would no longer aid in the destruction of the Tower. _The Crimson King is a fool, _he thought, the familiar cold anger brewing within him. He could have killed John 117, the last Spartan, and one of the only two remaining direct decedents of Arthur Eld, back in the Maine of 1977, but The Crimson King had forced him to stay his hand. Now a tingle spread up against Walter's spine. It was not exactly fear, but rather the knowledge of approaching danger. He had orchestrated the death of Susan Delgado, the woman who had carried Roland's child, Walter having marked him long ago as the gunslinger most likely to survive the Fall of Gilead, precisely because he knew the threat that the Line of Eld presented to both his agenda, and that of The Crimson King. He had planned both the conception and the coming birth of Mordred son of Roland, not because he thought he could control the child (Mordred's only thoughts even in his mother's womb being limited to Eat, Sleep, Rape, and Kill), but because he realized that Roland's seed mixed with Mia daughter of none, a spirit of the Prim, would create a being strong enough to kill off Arthur Eld's last remaining descendants. _In another lifetime I might have thought I could control Mordred, but now I am wiser. I have the writer to thank for that. _

Yet, Cortana had been right in believing that Walter, while having achieved a state of quasi-immortality much like Roland, was not omnipotent. When he had learned that she and John were sleeping in the same bed together he had felt; well not fear, certainly never fear, but again just that heightened state of realizing that danger was fast approaching. John was beginning to grow old. Even Roland, as quasi-immortal as he was, about half the age as Walter was himself, would soon reach the clearing at the end of the path. Both of these gunslingers would die, if not by Walter's hands or The Crimson King, then surely through the passage of time. Once that happened there would be no one left to assume The Mantel. Yet if Cortana managed to conceive John's child, if another of the Line of Eld was born into the worldâ€¦|

_Well then, _Walter thought. _As Eddie Dean might say, both me and

The Crimson King will be up shit creek without a paddle._

Yes, The Crimson King was a fool, a fool for allowing the Spartan to live even when he was at his weakest, when both his MIJOLNIR armor and the emotional armor that he wore had been destroyed, both by the efforts of Cortana and of the dark man. Walter knew now exactly what he wanted and how to overthrow his master. He looked again at his hand, and then at the long line of crosses leading into the city, the bodies upon them hanging loosely from the nails and barbed wire that attached them to the steel beams, their skin stretched like thin paper across their skeletons. _Existence is simply too visceral, _he concluded. _I will kill Cortana; end the threat of the Line of Eld. Then I will go to The Dark Tower, breach it, and ascend to the godhead itself._

â€|

4:00 P.M., June 1st 1999 (Gregorian Calendar) The Dixie Pig, New York, New York

The low men stood there, the can-toi, the foot soldiers of The Crimson King. The skin upon their face was stretched until the bones of their cheeks were showing and the flesh had the look of plastic. On each of their foreheads was a great Crimson Red eye, the symbol cut into their skin, the blood swirling underneath, both never clotting and never flowing from the wound. There was another creature in the corner, a being Susannah and Cortana had never seen, and that Mia had only seldom beheld. The taheen sat there at one of the rounded tables, its head that of a hawk, the body of a man, and sharp razor like claws for hands. Next to him sat another taheen, this creature having the head of a bulldog, one fang hanging out of its mouth as it watched the spectacle play out before him, the folds of its furry skin draping like a triple chin along its neck. To Cortana's left there was a thick tapestry hiding the contents of the dining room behind. The fabric fluttered and Cortana briefly caught a glimpse of the room. There was a long table lined with several dark figures, all sitting with wine glasses filled with blood. A roasted human baby, its fleshed seared a crisp brown and an apple in its mouth, sitting at the center of the table, several large chunks of flesh already ripped off.

_Vampires, _Cortana thought. Callahan's_ vampires. They are real. _Firm hands grasped each of her arms, and she did not resist as the low men pulled her hands behind her back, the energy sword being plucked effortlessly from the waistband of her jeans. A figure walked towards the women, and although he looked human, when he smiled Cortana saw that his teeth were all filed down to sharp points.

Richard Sayre spoke, "Hile Mia and Cortana, daughters of none." He looked at Mia, "Is the brownie still in there?" Susannah/Mia's head reared back and a glob of spit was hurled at Richard Sayre. He easily avoided the glob, twisting his shoulders to do so, and wagged his finger in front of Susannah/Mia. "Manners," he said. "Mia, I am disappointed that you do not have more control. Perhaps the child shouldn't be placed in your care."

"Please," Mia begged. "You promised me. You said I could have seven years with my chap. That I could give him the best."

Sayre shook his head, "The question is whether or not you can give your chap the best. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, and besides you should feel honored." He looked at Cortana, "You carry the Line of Eld, while Cortana does not. That alone should suffice would you not agree Mia?"

Mia opened her mouth to answer, but her voice was cut off by another Earth shattering contraction. Liquid rushed to the floor between her thighs as Mia's water broke.

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(Time/Space Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

Cortana had fought off the urge to resist as she and Mia had been escorted through the Dixie Pig, as well as the urge to vomit at what she had seen in the restaurant's hidden basement. The dozen low men that followed Richard Sayre, all of them armed with Plasma Rifles and Covenant Carbines, guarded the three women as they were led to a door, a portal between worlds. This door was not made of ghost wood as the portal in the Doorway Cave had been, but rather of rusting iron. Once Mia, now entering the last stages of her labor, was guided through, her and Susannah split bodies in much the same way and painful fashion as Cortana had split off her rampant personalities in her final moments onboard the Didact's ship. Cortana watched, not as helpless as the low men and Sayre believed, tied to a wooden chair whose white paint was beginning to chip, as the human doctor and low men nurses rushed about. Both Susannah and Mia were strapped down on cold metal gurneys, twin glass domes connected by rubber insulated wires on both their heads. When Mia cried out in pain, so did Susannah, all though the young black woman's stomach was still perfectly flat while Mia's remained bloated.

There was a robot, similar in appearance to Andy of the Calla, standing in the corner with an incubator held in his hands. _I will have to take him out first, _Cortana thought. _I have to recreate what happened during our fight with the Wolves._

"The baby's head is crowning," the doctor said, peering in between Mia's thighs. Cortana braced herself for what she was about to do when the room stretched and her eyesight flashed red.

â€|

_ Jake and Callahan stood in the heart of the Dixie Pig, the boy holding his ruger pistol, the Priest standing on top of a table ten feet from him holding out a cross in his right hand and the scrimshaw turtle that Cortana had dropped at the foot of the gutter in his left. The low men and taheen were at the moment hypnotized by the purity and beauty of the turtle, its white surface glistening even in the restaurant's dim light. Callahan sensed what was behind the tapestry. He sensed the vampires. Not the mosquitoes that he hunted and killed for years while he wandered the dozens of versions of America. These were the originals, the Grandfathers. _

_ Callahan turned to Jake, "Go! You are the only one left that can save them."_

_ Jake shook his head, "I am not leaving you here."_

_ What Callahan did next disarmed Jake. The Priest smiled, the wrinkles and scars along his face disappearing, and he had the look of a much younger man. A man not tortured by years of guilt, alcoholism, and lonely wandering. "We were supposed to take care of each other, and we did." _

_ Jake still did not move, "Callahan, pleaseâ€¦" _

_ Callahan shook his head, his smile not faltering, "We will see each other again." Jake looked at him, his eyes red. Holding the pistol he looked both the gunslinger and the twelve year old child that he was. Callahan turned his back to Jake, "You said it yourself. There are other worlds than these." He did not check to see if Jake had left, and instead raised both the cross and the turtle in front of the tapestry. The fabric was brushed aside and thirteen figures, most clad in nineteenth century garments, some in black leather, their fangs protruding from their mouths, their skin the grey color of death, stormed into the main dining room. The cross was suddenly clothed in a aura of White light, and the Grandfathers halted. _

_ "In the name of God the Father, and his son the lord Jesus Christ I command you to stop," Callahan said. _

_ The lead vampire laughed, his voice guttural, emerging from his half decayed lungs, and stepped forward. "False Priest. Give up your sigul if you dare." _

_ Callahan paused, and then tucked the cross away in the pocket of his stained khaki pants, the White disappearing as he did. The lead vampire roared in triumphed, blood spurting out in specks as he did. He charged, two of the other Grandfathers following close behind him. Callahan struck out his right hand, and pure unfiltered White light, the same light John had saw in his vision of The Dark Tower, came out. It engulfed the entire building in its brilliance, destroying even the most well hid shadows. The three vampires were consumed by it, their bodies disintegrating into dust and ash. _

_ "I need no sigul!" Callahan shouted, his voice amplified and covered in echoes. _

_ "I come in the name of Jerusalem's Lot, of New York, of the UNSC, and of Gilead! I come in the name of the Ka-tet of the Nineteen!" _

_ The Grandfather's cowered, holding their hands in front of their face, shielding their eyes from the light, and their flesh began to boil. _

_ "I come in the name of the Line of Eld! I come to reclaim The Mantel that was lost!" _

_ Callahan's fingers gripped the scrimshaw turtle tighter, and it was in that moment that one of the taheen, the hawk man that Cortana had seen earlier, had his view of the turtle blocked and he snapped out his hypnotized state. Slowly the taheen crept behind Callahan, allowing the old man to bellow all he wanted. The taheen had visions of being rewarded by the dark man, perhaps even The Crimson King himself, for killing one of the ka-tet. He struck upward at the Priest, his claw like fingers grazing the man's neck, a trickle of blood spilling out. Callahan whipped around with his elbow and caught the taheen in the beak, breaking it and causing the hawk man to bleed

as well. He had turned his back on the vampires, the Grandfathers, and Callahan heard the thundering of footsteps as they stampeded towards them. No longer were they concerned about the light, or the turtle that the Priest carried. They smelled blood. _

_ The table tipped over and the White light in Callahan's hand flickered and faded away as the vampires pinned him to the ground. The taheen that had wounded him attempted to get away, but two of the Grandfathers seized him, ripping into his throat with their fangs. Struggling on the ground, crying out in pain as the vampires tore into his arms, legs and throat, Callahan reached into his pocket. The Grandfathers would likely tear him to pieces rather than turn him, but there was only one way to make sure. His hand grasped a pocket knife, one that his father had given him when he was a teenager and that he had carried around with him always throughout his life. There was another sharp pain as one of the vampires ripped open the artery in his left leg and began to drink. _

_ Pulling air into his lungs Callahan shouted, "Hile Roland, John, and Jake. Hile the Line of Eld!" He pulled out the pocket knife and flipped it open. A pair of claws sank into the flesh of his arm, and he ripped it way, yelling as the muscle was torn from the bones. He breathed in one last time, "May you find The Dark Tower, and may you breach it!" With a single thrust he plunged the blade into his heart.

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Cortana rushed back into the chair, tears spilling from her eyes. _He's gone, the old man is gone._ Jake was alive though, or at least she hoped he was, for she had not seen him leave. _Callahan said that Jake was the only one left that could save us. What happened to the others? _

"I need hot water damnit," said the doctor, still between Mia's legs, his voice distant in Cortana's mind. She gritted her teeth. Cortana had seen what was underneath the Dixie Pig, the horror of what was plastered along the walls, and the impossibly long hallway Jake would have to run down in order to reach her and Susannah. Cortana was not going to be rescued, not again. The dark haired woman bit into her cheek, pressing down with her teeth until she felt the taste of blood, and with a yank pulled her arm out from its socket, the rope falling limp onto the floor.

Cortana's head wobbled in pain and she fought to refocus her vision. From the far side of the room, the noises seeming even more distant now than ever, there was a sharp smack followed by the crying of a baby. Mordred Deschain, son of Roland, of the Line of Eld, had been born.

41. Chapter 41

Chapter 41: The Line of Eld

_Eddie Dean sat in the middle row of third class, on a plane heading to JFK National Airport. There were several kilos of cocaine duct taped underneath each armpit. It is the year 1987 and his job is to smuggle drugs into New York for Brooklyn crime boss Enrico Balazar, the payment that he receives being that his brother Henry is allowed

to live. He would never deliver the drugs, and the result is that his brother is beheaded. Eddie and Roland would kill all of Balazar's men that day, and in another reality him, Roland, and John would kill those same men again in 1977. But those events are still several hours away, and for now Eddie just sits there, wearing a long sleeved shirt to cover up the track marks along his arm where he frequently injects the drug heroin into his body. Eddie's eyes turn light blue and through the doorway along the Western Sea, the gunslinger enters his mind. _

_ Roland reaches into Eddie's pocket and clasps a small coin. He grips it tight and exits Eddie Dean's mind, the coin traveling with him into mid-world. There is the crisp smell of salt, the sound of waves breaking calmly along the sandy shore, and the gunslinger stands there looking through the open doorway. The doorway's perspective is that of Eddie's, sitting there on the flying carriage as the gunslinger calls it. Roland sees the young man look around, wondering where the lost seconds had gone, and why he had the brief but very vivid feeling that his mind was being shared by another person. The gunslinger turns his attention towards his closed right fist, two of the fingers now missing, having been eaten by the lobstrosities which roamed these shores. Slowly he opens his fist and sees the coin lying in the palm of his hand. He turns the quarter over and his heart nearly stops as he sees what is on the back. The image is that of an eagle with arrows clutched in its talons, an olive branch underneath. It is the sigil of Gilead that was._

_ While the gunslinger examines the quarter, on yet another level of the Tower a six year old boy, born on a planet many light years from Earth, catches a quarter out of the air. The child has freckles on his cheeks and a gap between his teeth. His hair is brown, much like Roland's, and his eyes are light blue. John shouts a single word._

_ "Eagle." _

â€|

4:45 P.M., June 10th 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Lovell, Maine

Two long black tire tracks stretched along the two lane road in the Maine of 1977. The silence of the peaceful backwoods, the road itself flanked by acres of pinewood forest, is marred by the sound of screeching as John slams on the breaks of Cullum's Jeep. The car stops just meters from a figure standing the road, the man clad in black armor, his ODS helmet off, and a pistol strapped to his hip. There are dark black splotches on the walk-in's face, the glands in his throat swollen and red, and from his nose runs a constant stream of yellow mucus. The helljumper barely registers the jeep, clutching his stomach as he falls to his knees. While the walk-in's mouth opens in silent agony, John exited the Jeep followed by Roland and Eddie, the gunslinger pausing long enough to grab his gun belt from underneath the seat.

"Marine," John said, walking towards the slowly dying ODS.

The walk-in looks up and sticks out a hand towards the Spartan, "Get away from me or you'll catch it too."

John, who thanks to what the Librarian had done to him on Requiem, was immune to virtually all communicable diseases. The Master Chief

got on to one knee and puts a hand onto the ODS'T's shoulder. "What is your name and rank?"

The walk-in, his arms trembling as he attempted to brace himself on all fours, looked up at John. "Who's asking?" he said, giving a weak smile.

"Master Chief Petty Officer Sierra 117."

The ODS'T's eyes grew wide, and he stared at the nearly seven foot tall man kneeling next to him. "No, you're dead."

"I got better." The sound of John's voice triggered something in the back of the helljumper's mind. John fished around his collar and pulled out his dog's tags, showing them to the walk-in. The man read the three numbers imprinted on the thin sheet of metal.

"It is you." The man attempted to stand up but the Master Chief increased the pressure on the ODS'T's back with his hand, forcing him to stay on all fours. The helljumper settled for raising his trembling right arm and gave John a weak salute, "Sir."

John returned the salute, "Name and rank soldier."

"Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck," he turned to the two gunslingers who were standing there silently. "You guys can call me Eddie."

Eddie Dean fought to keep his mouth from hanging open and only partially succeeded. He looked Buck over once more. _He even looks a bit like me. Hell we could be related. _Buck went into a coughing fit, bringing his fist up to cover his mouth. When he removed it his gauntleted hand was covered in blood.

"Tell me what happened," John said.

"What didn't happen?" Buck said. Another cramp hit him and he clutched his stomach, gritting his teeth. "First the Covenant went quiet, no contact at all. What ships we found were empty. Then all the AI's started going Rampant, blowing up ships or evacuating the atmosphere. They deactivated all of them, even the ones that were still sane." He began coughing again, a long trail of mucus running from his nose. Buck leaned forward and vomited, more blood spilling onto the asphalt. John put a hand on his chest and held him up, waiting for the marine to catch his breath. Buck continued, "We lost contact with the colonies, couldn't travel through slipspace. There was an Insurrection in the Sol system and Hood was replaced by Fleet Admiral Raymond Fielger." He shook his head, "That guy was crazy. He began ordering executions," His brown eyes looked into John's, "Crucifying people in broad daylight. The disease came, killed one billion people in the first month, and the executions turned into slaughters." He coughed again, clutching his side as his stomach felt as if it was being turned inside out. "It was genocide, and our own people were doing it. My squad refused to kill a bunch of kids that had been labeled as Insurrectionists, and we were hunted down as traitors." He closed his eyes, "I was the only one that escaped."

"How did you get here?" John asked.

"I don't know," Buck said. He clutched his chest and struggled to

breath. "There was a portal. It was like a slip-space rupture only," he paused, "different. I can't really explain what it looked like." He yelled out in pain, the organs in his abdomen beginning to liquefy, and he rolled over onto his back.

John bent over him, "I'm getting you to a hospital."

"No," Buck said. He struggled to breath, his swollen throat cutting off the path to his lungs. "This virus moves faster than anything anyone has ever seen." His hand moved to the compartment in his armor. He struggled at first to open it, finally flipping the latch. Buck pulled out a small bundle of plastic explosives and handed it to John. "It's new, laced with napalm." The walls of his throat were on fire and his voice became strangled. "It will destroy everything within ten meters." John's left hand clenched into a fist as he took the explosive from Buck. He reached forward to take the marine's dog tags when Buck grabbed his wrist.

"Leave it."

With little effort John pulled his arm away from Buck's hand and tore off the dog tags. As he was pulling away Buck reach forward again and grabbed the Master Chief's shirt.

"I see him," he said. His eyes were beginning to glaze over. "I see him whenever I close my eyes. He is always grinning, always wearing a black robe. The Walking Dude." His words were cut off as his swollen throat completely cut off the air to his lungs. Buck swallowed hard and the pathway opened again. He spoke in a whisper, "The Covenant Man."

Roland walked forward, pulling the hard caliber from its holster. "Spartan," he said. John nodded and stood up, placing Buck's dog tags in the back pocket of his jeans. Roland placed a closed fist on his forehead as he stood over the marine, "Hile gunslinger."

Buck, no longer able to speak, thought, _This is a dream. Just a hallucination. _He closed his eyes and thought about Veronica, pushing down the memories of seeing Dare hanging from the steel cross.

Roland leveled the long gun and cocked the hammer back, "Till we meet in the clearing at the end of the path." The revolver thundered.

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The Master Chief drove slower than normal, and Eddie pointed at a gas station with a telephone booth standing out front. "It will be easier to call Cullum and have him meet us somewhere, maybe even where all the walk-ins are coming from, then to drive all the way back to his house." John nodded and pulled into the parking lot, frowning at the primitive payphone.

"We don't have any money," the Spartan said.

"I'm sure Cullum has some spare change lying around," Eddie said. He opened up the glove compartment and pulled out a small metal box. He shook it, and the coins inside jingled. Opening it Eddie made a forced laugh, "Man this guy must really like quarters for some

reason. There must be ten dollars worth of them in here." He turned to John, "Do they still use dollars in the future?"

"Credits," John said. "But I know what quarters are."

Eddie pulled seventy-five cents from the box and handed the rest to John. "Don't know about you guys but I'm starving. Think you could see if they have anything to eat in there?" John grunted in response and took the metal box, dumping the quarters into one of his large hands. Eddie twisted back to look at Roland, "Think you could get some aspirin for my leg?"

"Yes," Roland said.

"Say aspirin."

"Astin."

Eddie made another forced chuckle as he got out of the Jeep, "Never gets old."

Roland and John walked into the store while Eddie went into the phone booth, both men leaving their guns in the car. John walked up to the counter, grimacing at the greasy hotdogs that were displayed, turning around on the hot rollers, but saw nothing else that looked remotely edible. He looked at the short balding man behind the counter, who had to crane his neck to look up at the Spartan, and pointed at the hotdogs. "Three of those."

"Coming right up," the balding man said, pulling out three buns and a pair of tongs. "You from out of town?"

"Yes."

"Oh? Where from?" the man asked, putting the third hotdog into the bun and placing it in a red cardboard box.

"Out."

The balding man sighed, "Just trying to make some conversation. Did you hear about the shootout that happened this morning?"

"No." Roland walked up behind John and placed a tin of aspirin on the counter. "I thought you couldn't read."

"I can read," Roland said, glaring at him. "It's your language that I have trouble with."

"You seem to speak English well enough."

The balding man behind the counter looked at the Spartan and the gunslinger warily, pushing the hotdogs towards them, "That will beâ€¦" John put the entire fistful of quarters down on the counter. He grabbed his hotdog, stuffing it into his mouth in two bites, barely registering the taste. As John turned around to walk out of the store the balding man called out to him, "Sir, your change."

"Keep it." John stopped as he walked out the store, and turned around to face Roland who was holding the two remaining hotdogs and the tin

of aspirin, blocking the gunslingers path. The gunslinger's reflexes were faster than his, the Master Chief could admit that. His aim was slightly better as well, his hearing and vision nearly identical to that of a Spartan, and as far as John could tell Roland was an unaugmented human. There was also something different about the blue steeled revolvers both Roland and Eddie wielded, although John did not know exactly what that difference was. Yet both men did not have their guns on them, and with John being able to lift three times his own body weight, here he had the advantage. Roland would listen to what he had to say.

"You are blocking my way," Roland said, and the finger on his left hand twitched as if wanting to reach for the gun that was not there.

John widened his stance, "The revolvers, what are they?"

"Excalibur," Roland said, his light blue eyes cold as embers.

"And only the dinhs of Gilead can wear them?"

"Aye," Roland said, "Only the Line of Eld." He gestured with his head towards Eddie who was busy talking on the phone, "But exceptions can be made."

"Dinh means king in the High Speech, Cortana told me that," John said. He folded his arms, "Why are you not dinh?"

Roland's brows furrowed, and as the two men glared at each other they looked for a moment almost identical, "I was dinh of the ka-tet. But then you came, and now the ka-tet has no dinh."

John shook his head, "That is not what I meant."

"Do not presume to know me Spartan," Roland said, his voice remaining calm and even despite the anger in his light blue eyes, "Aye I was the last dinh of the gunslingers, but I led them to slaughter on Jericho Hill." His jaw clenched, "And now because of me I am the last of my line."

"No," John said. "We are the last of our line."

Roland looked at John, his eyes scanning his entire body, as if truly seeing him for the first time. The brown hair, the light blue eyes, the similar posture and stance, and nearly the same personalities. _He is my kin, _the gunslinger thought. He shook his head, "No. You can't be of the Line of Eld."

"I am," John said. "The White told me I was."

Roland's grip on the two boxes of hotdogs and the tin of aspirin loosened, "How?"

"I don't know," John said. "But we are related."

Roland looked down at the ground, "You are better than me." His words startled John although the Master Chief did not show it. Roland brought his head up and looked him in the eye, "Aye I may be faster, but you are still better." The gunslinger sighed, "You should be

dinh."

John breathed heavily out of his nose. He remembered how monarchies were supposed to function from DÃ©jÃ 's classes. "How old are you Roland?"

Roland hesitated for a moment, "A thousand years, maybe more."

John breathed heavily again. If Roland had told him this a month ago he would not have believed him, but now after everything that had happened it was hard not to. "Then you know that is not how it is supposed to work."

"But you still won't follow me."

John shook his head, "No," he turned towards Eddie who was still talking on the phone, "But he does. Susannah, Jake and Callahan do." He turned back to Roland, "And so would others." He uncrossed his arms and let them drift towards his side, "You are a king Roland, start acting like it." He turned his back to the gunslinger, walking towards Eddie. _And maybe then I would follow you. _

42. Chapter 42

Chapter 42: The Tet Corporation

Eddie hung up the phone in the booth, the receiver making the metallic click of machinery that made him for a moment feel homesick. _Who are you kidding, _Eddie thought. _Mid-world is your home now. I couldn't go back now even if I wanted to_. He brought up his head to look at Roland and John who were walking towards him. _Besides I'd miss long, tall and ugly number one and number two too much. _There was something different about John and Roland's posture, Eddie observed, but he could not quite put his finger on it. He would later conclude that up until this point their bodies had been tense whenever they were around each other, as if ready to fight at a moment's notice. "Thanks," he said, taking the hotdog and tin of aspirin from Roland. He tore off the top of the tin and popped five pills into his mouth, chewing them rather than swallowing. The habits of a junkie, even a reformed one, still died hard. He took a large bite of the hotdog and began to talk again, pieces of bread flying from his mouth as he did.

"I've been thinkingâ€|"

"You shouldn't," John said.

"Very funny Chief, you should be a standup comedian. Get your own special on late night television. Hell you're talkative enough."

John grunted and Roland said, "What is your idea Eddie?"

"Well you remember how Susannah said that back in 1964 she had ten million dollars in the bank and it was all being taken care of by her godfather Moses Carver?"

"Vaguely," Roland said. "What is your point?"

"Well if her godfather is as standup of a guy as Susannah says he is then the money would still be there. Could have even tripled by now. I say we have Cullum go talk to Carver and convince him to invest the money in the Tet Corporation. Get Tower's friend Aaron Deepneau in on it too since he used to be a lawyer. Make the company legitimate."

"And what would the Tet Corporation be doing?" John asked.

Eddie shrugged, "Anything they wanted, but the main goal would be to protect the Rose."

John crossed his arms and thought for a moment, "There other goal would be to fight the Sombra Corporation. Covert operations."

"You mean doing stuff that isn't technically legal in order to undermine Sombra?" Eddie asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," John said. "How do you plan on having Cullum convince Carver to invest Susannah's money?"

Eddie scratched his head, "Didn't really think about that. Guess we tell Cullum something that only Susannah and her godfather would know."

"That would just frighten Carver, not convince him," John said.

"We need a sigul," Roland said. "A symbol of the ka-tet, preferably either from my world or the Spartan's"

"And how is that going to help?" Eddie asked.

The corners of Roland's mouth twitched, "You will see." He began to reach into his pocket, as did John. For once the Spartan was faster than the gunslinger. John pulled out a coin from his pocket, the quarter that Dr. Halsey had tested him with when he was six years old on Eridanus II. He handed the quarter to Eddie.

"It's just a quarter," he said, puzzled.

"It is the only thing I own," John said. Eddie hesitated, his hand reaching out and then pulling back in, before he grabbed it.

Holding the coin up to Roland he asked, "Will this work?"

Roland nodded, "It should. Look at the back of the coin."

Eddie did, "Still looks normal to me."

"The eagle on the back is the sigul of Gilead," Roland said. Eddie looked up at the gunslinger and John glanced over at him. "Do you know something that only Susannah and her godfather would?" Eddie nodded. "Then close your fist and think about it."

"Okay," Eddie said. He did as the gunslinger said, but when he opened his fist nothing had happened. He shook his head, "I don't think it worked."

"It did," Roland said, and walked past Eddie towards the Jeep. "Let's get moving."

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Imagine a road, for a moment, not so different from any of other two lane roads that crisscross the eastern United States in the summer of 1977. The yellow lines separating the two lanes of traffic are chipped and faded. Every few hundred feet there are tire marks where an unlucky driver had to slam on their breaks. Perhaps because a car had drifted in to the other lane, or perhaps because a deer decided to cross the road at that particular moment, or maybe, just maybe, because a walk-in from another world decided to cross their path. Trees line either side of the road, their leaves swaying gently in the wind. There is the smell of pine and tree sap. On one side of this road there is a hill that slowly rolls up, the summit already blocking half of the setting sun. On the other is a lake which had partially frozen over in a freak storm in during August of 1959, and later in January of 1971 had a tornado whirl across its surface. A tornado in Lovell Maine; that was not an event that the locals would soon forget. This was a place of strange weather, where thunderstorms would come out of nowhere, seeming to spring up from thin air. This is where reality was at its thinnest, and why should existence not seem an intangible thing in a place like this? Why should our existence be more absolute than that of characters in a book by Stephen King, or Eric Nylund, or even Joseph Staten?

Another storm is growing, and the wind picks up, snatching the leaves off the trees. It is smaller than the storm over New Mombasa just before the portal to the Ark was opened, but the essence of it is the same. John Cullum is waiting there leaning up his old Ford Galaxy truck. He has a Red Sox Baseball cap on his head and pulls it tighter to his scalp as a crack of dry thunder crawls across the sky, the dark clouds blocking out what was left of the sunlight. He had been awarded the Bronze Star, the Distinguished Service Cross, and two Purple Hearts in Korea. These metals were now buried deep somewhere in the basement of his house, and he did not much care to remember which box he had put them in. He had a wife, Catherine, but she had died several years back after losing her fight with cancer. His son, who had his mother's black hair and his light blue eyes, had served in Vietnam with the Seventh Calvary. He was Arlington now, and John Cullum wishes he could go see him more often.

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John Cullum recognized his own army green Jeep with the failing clutch and a dent just above the right tire as it pulled into the driveway of house number seveteen, and waved a hand at the three men that walked out of it.

"Storms brewin," Cullum said, looking up at the sky, his yankee accent thick as ever. He gestured towards the house, "The Beckhardt's leave a key under the matt. Figer we go inside before the rain hits."

Eddie tilted his head, "You know you are just a little bit scary."

Cullum laughed, and when he did he looked almost nothing like John 117 or Roland Deschain, "I house sit for em' ever now and then, that tis why I know." He waved his hand for the others to follow, reaching for the key at the foot of the door and turning the latch with his

left hand as it unlocked. The others followed him in. The main hallway led directly to the kitchen, a large expanse of stovetops and cookware that connected to a breakfast room with a wide circular table situated underneath an ornamental chandelier. John Cullum sat at one of the chairs, wincing as he did. He noticed the look that the other three men gave him, "Arthritis. Have it in my hip and knee," He circled the wrist of his right hand, "Startin to come in here too." He smiled, "But I aint old yet."

The Master Chief and Roland both fought back their own winces as they sat down, the dry twist eating at the same joints as John Cullum. Eddie sat in the chair closest to Cullum. "So what do ya boys want to talk about?" he asked, elongating the o and u in about. He held up a hand as Eddie began to talk, "Why don't ya start by tellin me your names and where ya come from."

"Well my name is Eddie Dean, and I'm from New York." Cullum looked at Eddie expectantly and the younger man sighed, "1987." Cullum raised an eyebrow but did not question what Eddie had said. Eddie pointed to the Spartan and the gunslinger, "That is Roland Deschain of Gilead, and Sierra 117 of the United Nations Space Command, 2557."

Cullum's eyebrows raised higher and he looked at the Master Chief, "You a cyborg or somethin son?"

The Master Chief shook his head, "A Spartan."

"Ah," Cullum said, as if he understood. He looked at Roland, "You want me to do somethin don't ya?"

"Aye," Roland said. "But why do you trust us?"

John Cullum chuckled, "I'm not stupid ya know." He looked between the Master Chief and Roland, "Don't think I've noticed dat you boys look a little like me?" He leaned forward on the table, "And you two look enough alike to be related."

"We are," Roland said. Eddie's head swung around so fast that his neck cracked, and the gunslinger held up a hand to stop him from talking, "Later Eddie." He looked at Cullum, "Mine and the Spartan's stories are far too long for us to tell them but Eddie will tell you his." He turned to Eddie and the younger man sighed.

Eddie talked for over an hour, the wind buffering against the windows, the clouds overhead growing darker with each passing minute, refusing to yield the rain they held as the palaver continued. He told John Cullum about being pulled through the doorway along the Western Sea of mid-world by Roland, how his wife Susannah had been pulled through a similar doorway from the year 1964. He spoke about Roland training the both of them to be gunslingers, about finding a giant bear in the forest of mid-world named Shardik (at the time Eddie was reminded of a book by Richard Adams, although he did not put much stock into the thought at the time). He told Cullum about drawing Jake Chambers through yet another doorway, about arriving at the city of Lud and finding evidence of the dark man's work, about Blaine the Mono and how much of a pain he was, about traveling to Topeka in a version of America that the dark man had destroyed with a virus (a virus not too dissimilar to the disease that crushed the UNSC), about meeting the man in black in person in an empty Emerald City in the Land of Oz, and how the gunslinger could not hit him even

with the blue steeled revolvers. He spoke about reentering mid-world and traveling through yet another forest where they had met the Master Chief and Cortana, about the Wolves of the Calla, the Doorway Cave, and the breaking of the ka-tet.

John Cullum sighed. He believed every word, as impossible as the story was. The evidence that the story was true was sitting across from him at the round wooden table. Two characters ripped right out of the pages of several books, two created by an author he knew very well, and one from an author who wrote his book in a time period that John Cullum would not live to see. There were also the guns, the blue steeled revolvers seeming to give off their own aura of power, the pistol that the Master Chief wore like nothing Cullum had ever seen before. It was that and the Horn of Gilead that Roland wore, the leather strap crossing his chest, the sigil itself disfigured by a small crack and stained with blood. "Okay," he said and pulled out a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket, "Now what do ya want me ta do?"

And Eddie spoke for another half hour. When he got to the part about combating the Sombra Corporation, the business representatives of The Crimson King, Cullum held up his hand. "Suppose ya are meaning we do a few things that aren't strictly legal."

"Yeah," Eddie said. "Blow up a few buildings if that is what the situation calls for. Just don't get caught. There is also another company, North Central Positronics. They probably operate under the radar in this world but they are just as dangerous."

"Got it," Cullum said, scribbling down in the notebook.

"Find out what you can about Project Freelancer," the Master Chief said and Cullum looked at him. "They work for North Central Positronics, and they are developing technology and weapons that come from my time period." Cullum nodded and scribbled again.

"One thing," he said. "How am I supposed to convince this Aaron Deepneau and Moses Carver to help me?"

Eddie pulled the quarter out his pocket and slid it over to Cullum, "Use this."

Cullum picked it up, "It's just a quarter." Again he elongated the u and a, his northern accent ever present.

"Blow on it," Roland said. Cullum hesitated before cupping his hand and blowing on the coin. The quarter glowed white and began to vibrate. From its depths Susannah's voice rang out.

"We buried Pimsy under the apple tree and Daddy Moses told me not to cry anymore, because God thinks it's a shame to mourn a pet too longâ€¦" her voice drifted away.

Eddie's bottom lip quivered the slightest bit, the movement all but unnoticeable, "I was the only other person she ever told."

John Cullum held the quarter away from him, as if it would soon burn his fingers, and the first look of disbelief flashed across his face, "What is this?" His northern accent had all but disappeared.

"It is a sigul of both the UNSC and of Gilead," Roland said. "A sigul of the Line of Eld."

John Cullum stared wide eyed at both Roland and John 117. He moved to put the quarter in the pocket of his pants, hesitated, and then placed it in the front breast pocket of his flannel shirt. There it would stay, close to his chest, near his beating heart. In the months that followed his meeting with these three men from other worlds he would meet with Aaron Deepneau and Moses Carver, forming the ka-tet of the Rose. They would see the rose themselves, and as the years passed the Tet Corporations covert war against both the Sombra Corporation and North Central Positronics would span nearly three dozen different realities along the levels of The Dark Tower. He would get little sleep in those years, plagued by the stress of building an army in secret, would read casualty reports from other worlds as they came through the doorways that the Tet Corporation would build late into the night. It Moses Carver who would make the decision expand the business war against IBM which had been secretly acquired by North Central, Aaron Deepneau who would fight the constant legal battles with Sombra over who rightly owned the vacant lot in New York which held the Rose, and it was John Cullum himself who ordered a raid against an organization named Project Freelancer which itself existed in several realities. Nearly a dozen lives had been lost in the raid, but what had been gained were the plans for an experimental armored exoskeleton and the capture of one Artificial Intelligence named Delta. He would lose more sleep after the failed attempt on the director of Project Freelancer's life, a man named Doctor Leonard Church, which had cost even more lives. When sleep did come he would dream. He would dream of a planet named Reach, purple ships burning its surface until it was glass, feeling the loss of millions of lives echo across his mind. He would dream of a grassy hill covered in bodies, and he would hear the sound of thunder as the last gunslingers charged to their deaths along the slope of Jericho Hill. But always he would dream of The Dark Tower, and of the field of roses that surrounded it. He would wake up covered in sweat, gripping the quarter that rested safely in the breast pocket of his night shirt. John Cullum would have these dreams until the year of 1989 when he was struck by an assassin's bullet in the right eye. His only regret was that he would never travel to those other worlds himself.

"One more thing," Eddie said. "Invest in a company called Microsoft. Do it fast and do it early."

Cullum nodded, subconsciously rubbing the quarter underneath the fabric of his shirt. _It is a sigul, a sigul from another world, _he thought. He looked at John and Roland, _And what are they?_ He thought further, _Kings, the Line of Eld. _Another thought crossed his mind, placed there by a foreign entity (a writer perhaps) _No they are dinhs. Dinhs of All-World. _He looked at them again, _Dinhs of everything._

Roland slid the contract drafted by Aaron Deepneau that gave the Tet Corporation ownership of the vacant lot, "For your father's sake, keep it safe."

Cullum nodded as he took the folded piece of paper, "Don't ya worry. When I make a promise I keep it."

At that moment the voice of Father Callahan struck across Eddie,

Roland, and the Master Chief's mind.

(Hile Roland, John, and Jake! Hile the Line of Eld!) There was the sound of Callahan crying out in pain. (May you find The Dark Tower, and may you breach it) His voice was cut off and then reasserted itself again, spoken not with words but with the last strength of Callahan's mind. (And reach the godhead itself!)

John's hand gripped the table, "He's gone."

"Good God," Eddie said, "What the hell is happening there? Did you see what happened to him too?"

John nodded, "Yes." He had seen an image, ever so briefly, of Callahan's legs being ripped from his torso by several figures clad in darkness. "Jake is alive."

"Aye," Roland said, hiding the relief from his voice. "He is going to rescue Cortana and Susannah."

"You boys go find em," John Cullum said. "Take my Jeep, I'll find it later." There was another crack of thunder from outside the house, the bolt of lightning striking a tree not one hundred meters from the house as the storm reached its apex.

Eddie nodded as the three men stood up, "If there is a doorway how much do you want to bet it's at house number nineteen?"

43. Chapter 43

Chapter 43: Reproduction

12:34 P.M., March 17th 1987 (Gregorian Calendar) Tet Corporation
Headquarters, New York, New York

Subject: Transcript of Conversation between Executive Vice Presidents
Aaron Deepneau, Moses Carver, CEO John Cullum, and Artificial
Intelligence Program Delta

John Cullum: The techies down stairs say it will take us three decades to completely reverse engineer the suit we captured. Four decades to get a working prototype. Personally I think they are blowing smoke up our asses.

Aaron Deepneau: Think it will take longer?

JC: Hell of a lot longer. First boy that tried to wear it broke nearly every bone in his body. A normal human can't use it

Moses Carver: Medical augmentations might be an option

JC: Techies have been throwing that idea around too, but frankly the technology we have now just won't cut it for the amount of surgery it would take. I say at the rate we are going it would take eighty to one-hundred years before we even come close to a prototype. At that point it would be up to Delta to run the company, and no offense but you just don't have the same passion we do

Delta: None taken. I find that intense human emotions cloud logical

reasoning

JC: See what I mean?

MC: There is another problem too. As far as the rest of the world is concerned we are a dental company. It is going to look a bit strange if all of a sudden we go from selling toothpaste to cranking out patents for military grade hardware

AD: We've toed the legal line before. Completely disregarded it in most cases

MC: That's the point. If we do this it's going to have to be in secret. That means developing research and testing facilities that won't strictly speaking exist. That's hundreds of billions of dollars we are throwing into an investment that we are not going to make a single dime off of

JC: Well looks like we are going to have to sell more toothpaste

MC: All the toothpaste in the world won't be enough to pay for this. At least our investments are going to well, although I had to pull our stock out of IBM. Seems they are under new management. How's Bill Gates doing by the way?

JC: Let's seeâ€¦fifteen assassination attempts across thirteen different realities one of which was successful. Eric Nylund has had five assassination attempts across three different realities, all of which were unsuccessful. All the versions of Bill and Eric are still blissfully unaware that Sombra and North Central want them dead. Also had one assassination attempt on a guy named Joseph Staten which we prevented. Almost didn't catch it because we never heard of the guy.

AD: And Stephen King?

JC: Nothing so far. I think the King's men are trying something a little more subtle with him

MC: What about other writer?

JC: Nothing at all. Haven't even come across a story that is even remotely like the one Eddie Dean told me. If there are multiple versions of him either only one of them actually writes the story or they all haven't been born yet

AD: This is just going to get worse the closer we get to 2001. Our resources are stretched thin enough as it is. If we are going to win this then we need the suit, and within the next decade not the next century

MC: Our little green friend has certainly been less helpful than we anticipated

D: Apologies, but I was only programmed with the data necessary to maintain Agent York's suit. Only the director was aloud full access to the data on the augmentation procedures and the powered armored exoskeleton

JC: I think what big D is trying to say is that we are screwed

D: Not necessarily. There is one other person who could help.

â€|

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

Mordred's first cries brought Cortana back to reality and for a moment, with her right arm hanging limply off the back of the chair, she was paralyzed. The baby itself looked normal enough, although it had the look of an infant that was already a few months old rather than less than a few seconds old. His hair was a dark black, the color reminding Cortana of the dark man's robe, his eyes a stunning light blue, and there was a Crimson Red birthmark on his right heel.

Mia reached out her hands towards Mordred, "Please let me hold him." The human doctor looked hesitantly at Sayre who nodded. Taking the baby Mordred into her arms Mia brushed her fingers across his dark hair, the baby looking up wide eyed at his mother. "Isn't he the most beautiful thing in existence?" Mia looked up at Sayer, "This is what I gave up immortality for."

Mia's words snapped Cortana out of her trance and she closed her eyes, concentrating. She felt the dark line of codes begin to run underneath her skin and Cortana pressed further until it felt as if the codes were cutting into her. Opening them she felt a jolt of electricity run along the tips of her left hand. It was then that several things happened at once. It was in those moments that the killing began, and baby Mordred began to change.

Cortana struck out with her left hand, blue bolts of electricity reaching out with crackling fingertips towards the robot that stood in the corner with the incubator, asking in a smarmy British accent whether or not it would still be needed. As the bolt of blue lightning struck him the robot, Nigel he was called, dropped the incubator, the device shattering as it hit the floor. Nigel body gave off a plume of soot colored smoke and the nauseous smell of burning plastic. His head turned in several directions, twisting so hard that if a man were to do it he would break his neck, before exploding. The flying shrapnel killed several low men next to him, and Richard Sayre turned around exposing the plasma rifle strapped to his hip to Susannah. There was a tugging at Sayre's belt as Susannah yanked the weapon free, giving the man, if he really was ever a man, enough time to turn around again so that he could take a full bolt of plasma to his chest. Susannah leveled the plasma rifle with two hands, unleashing the rounds in steadied controlled bursts, picking off the taheen as he raised his Covenant carbine to return fire.

Cortana ran through the hail of plasma fire towards Susannah, bolts impacting the floor and wall around the room and nipping at Cortana's feet as the can-toi returned fire, aiming her right shoulder for the wall in between Susannah and the metal table where the energy sword had been placed. There was a loud pop as Cortana slammed into the wall, and the world darkened. She bit her tongue to refocus and as her vision settled she saw that both the can-toi and Susannah had stopped firing. They were all looking at Mordred.

The child had become surrounded by an aura of Crimson Red, the

birthmark on his heel growing until it encompassed his whole body, turning black as it did. Thick fur sprouted from his skin and Mordred's limbs retracted. Seventeen more eyes emerged along his forehead, nineteen in all, his toothless mouth now sported two venomous fangs, and eight legs formed to replace the four limbs that had been lost.

The giant spider, a great Crimson eye painted in red fur along its back, reared back its fangs and sunk them into his mother's neck. Mia attempted to cry out in pain, but her voice was cut short as the venom worked its way into her nervous system, the heart being the last to shut down as it continued to pump blood out of the wound which Mordred drank eagerly. The low-men that were left fled, and the spider lifted up its head, blood and poison dripping from its fangs, and turned on Susannah. If in that moment she had rolled off the table and joined Cortana on the floor, or if Mordred had decided to finish feasting on his mother, Susannah would have survived. Ka has a will of its own though, and Mordred jumped off the metal gurney on which his now dead mother lay, and sunk his fangs into Susannah's arm. The arm turned black in an instant, and Susannah gritted her teeth as she attempted to raise the plasma rifle against Mordred's head, but the weapon was batted away by one of the giant spider's legs. Cortana reacted, reaching up to grab the energy sword off the table with her left hand, her right arm still pulsing in pain. The spider screeched at her, the sound digging in like knives into both women's minds, and rose up on his hind legs. Cortana activated the energy sword with a flick of her wrist, and with a mix of fear and panic, swung it at Mordred. The blade connected with one of the giant spider's legs, the wound refusing to cauterize as dark green blood poured out. Mordred screeched again and struck Cortana in the chest with his other remaining front legs, the hairs briefly sticking to her shirt as the woman was flung backwards into the metal table behind her. She slid across its surface and there was a metallic clang as both she and the table tipped over onto the floor. Cortana quickly got to her feet, raising the energy sword again. She scanned the room, looking for any sign of the giant spider, but Mordred was gone. There was a long trail of dark green blood leading out of the room, and thankfully in the opposite direction of the doorway they had come through.

Susannah moaned on the gurney, her breaths ragged, and Cortana rushed over to her. "Susannah!" She looked at the arm that Mordred had bitten, the decaying flesh now spreading rapidly towards her neck. "You are going to be alright," she said, moving to wrap her arms around Susannah to pick her up. "I'm going to get you help."

"Eddie," Susannah said. "Where's Eddie?"

"He's coming," Cortana said, and she tried to smile. "He will be here any moment with the others."

Susannah nodded and Cortana moved to pick her up again. "No," Susannah said. "Leave me. Go get the others. I will wait for you." Her breaths had become shallow now and Cortana ignored her, straining as she picked the young black woman off of the gurney. Susannah attempted to wrap her arms around Cortana's neck but they fell limp. With her last remaining strength she reached up and grabbed Cortana's blue shirt, the fingers hanging loosely on the collar. "Tell himâ€¦" she breathed in deeply, "Tell Eddieâ€¦" Her arm fell limp and her

head lolled to the side.

"No," Cortana said, her voice breaking. She placed Susannah down on the floor and put an ear over her heart, hearing nothing. She got onto both knees and placed both hands over Susannah's chest, ignoring the pain in her shoulder as she compressed. Cortana placed an ear over Susannah's heart again, then repeated the compressions. She did this several times, more times than even I can count. One minute stretched into five, and five minutes stretched into ten. Still her heart did not beat. Susannah's dark brown skin grew pale and at last Cortana stopped. She placed her forehead on Susannah's chest, wrapping her arms around her dead body. "I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I can't save anyone."

"No you can't." There was the sharp clack of boot heels as the man in black walked up behind her. Cortana spun around and stood up, reaching for the energy sword on her belt. The dark man tittered, "I left you alive because I thought you and John would be the ones to break Roland's ka-tet." He smiled his disgustingly awful smile, the smile of a man who finds laughter in other people's pain, and has become so accustomed to seeing others suffer that he himself has forgotten what it is like to feel that suffering. "I am not so proud as to not admit when I was wrong. I was wrong about Black Thirteen as well as both John and Roland showed considerable resilience to its affects." He tilted his head towards Susannah's body, "And now I am here to correct that mistake. Three down and four to go in the ka-tet." He looked back at Cortana, "I killed your precious John." The lie flowed easily off his tongue.

Cortana's eyes grew wide, "You're lying."

Walter shook his head, "No. In truth he was alone when he died. Eddie and Roland had abandoned him." He lifted his hands up to the seams of his hood, "Just like you abandoned him." He pulled the hood back and for the first time Cortana saw his face.

44. Chapter 44

Chapter 44: Cortana's Dual with the Dark Man

1900 Hours, August 2nd 2561 (Military Calendar) Richmond, North America, Earth

The Orbital Drop Shock Trooper swung the hammer down and the steel spike pierced through skin, veins, and tendons as it went through Doctor Halsey's wrist. She attempted to cry out in pain but only a moan escaped from her mouth due to her broken jaw. The ODSST raised the hammer again, ready to pound the spike all the way through, a spool of razor wire sitting by his side which would be used to tie her to the steel cross. Yet as he raised the tool a bullet whizzed over Halsey's head and struck him in the armpit, traveling all the way to his heart, his body dropping limply to the side. There was the chatter of semi automatic fire, coming from rifles of a much lower caliber than the ODSST's assault rifles. She saw the bullets ping and bounce off the black armor of the helljumpers and then heard a woman's voice shouting.

"Aim for their necks!"

She saw the Major pull out his pistol, his ODST helmet off in full defiance of the disease which was destroying the world around them, and then saw the back of his head explode into a shower of pink mist. What she saw after looking to see where the fire was coming from made her think that she was experiencing one last hallucination before death. There were six figures spread out in a loose wedge formation. They all wore tight fitting black jumpsuits emblazoned with the symbol of a white rose on the chest, and primitive gas masks which covered their entire face and head. The weapons they used were those that Halsey had only ever seen in museums or documentary holo reels. One rifle was made of both wood and metal with a glass optical scope fitted on its sights, a M14. The others were made of metal and plastic, with ridged barrels and crude iron sights, M16s. One of the figures fell in a spray of bullets, the shredder rounds all but destroying his body. The other figures adjusted their fire on the remaining three ODST's, the bullets finding the weak point in their armor around their necks, one helljumper falling on top of Halsey's chest.

The body was pushed off as the group's leader, the woman, reached her. "Target secure. Fan out into a protective perimeter." Four of the figures moved out and formed a box around Dr. Halsey's cross, getting onto one knee and raising their rifles to scan the street and buildings around them. The woman shouldered her M16 and picked Halsey up until she was on her feet. "Can you walk?" Halsey nodded and the woman threw Halsey's arm over her shoulder, supporting the doctor. The woman turned to the other four figures, "Move. We have thirty seconds before the door closes." The four figures in their black jumpsuits and masks stood up, their sites constantly scanning the three-hundred and sixty degree area around them. Halsey looked for the door but found none, until her eyes fell on a spot thirty meters behind the steel cross. The air seemed to shimmer there, similar to the way the air shimmers around an Elite with active camouflage. The first figure stepped backwards through the doorway, seeming to vanish into thin air right before Halsey's eyes. The woman who was supporting Halsey led the doctor to the doorway, and then stepped through.

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

She saw the dark man's face, and it was nothing like she expected. It was a face absent of scars, heavy wrinkles, or birth marks. It was a face not marred by any affliction you would typically associate with a walking enigma of a man. His skin was pale and waxy, but not so pale as to seem abnormal. His skin was the type of pale of an early nineteenth century pioneer who held up in his log cabin all winter. It was the kind of pale skin that expected to see the rays of the sun again once the spring thaw set in. His nose was straight and plain, his cheeks smooth, and there were deep crease marks along his forehead which was framed by loose strands of blonde hair. His eyes though were pure black, and as Cortana looked into them she felt her knees buckle. She expected to hear the voices of Rampancy enter her head, wanted them to so that she could escape the gaze of those dark pits. But they did not come and so Cortana was forced to hold on to her sanity.

The man in black pointed to a small cut that ran along his left cheek, "John gave me that you know. Right before he died he managed

to hit me, something that even the gunslinger could never do." Cortana's legs felt like they were encased in cement as she attempted to move, her hand gripping the energy sword tighter as she thought about plunging it into the dark man's chest. Still she stared wide eyed and helpless at Walter's face. His smile faded and a look of mock sadness passed over his features, "Should I tell you that he begged for his life before I killed him? No you wouldn't believe that would you? Perhaps I should tell you that he died standing, although that too is a lie. He died on his back." His smile returned, "And his last thoughts were of you."

"No!" The blue aura returned in a small explosion, bathing the room in its soft glow, the black equations racing wildly across her skin until they became little more than a blur. Cortana struck out her right hand, the pain in her injured shoulder now gone, and several bolts of blue electricity shot out towards the man in black. Walter threw up his hand and the electricity stopped short as if hit by an invisible conductor. He thrust his hand forward and the bolts bounced back and hit Cortana in the chest. She fell to her knees as every nerve in her body felt as if it was burning. Walter tittered as he slowly walked towards her, and she felt his leather boots strike her stomach as he kicked her, sending her flying over top Susannah's body and she collided with the far wall. Cortana attempted to get up but her legs buckled beneath her and she fell back down on the concrete floor.

"Fitting," the dark man said. "When we first met you couldn't stand. The wheel of ka has come full circle would you not say?"

Cortana closed her eyes.

(Call us forward) the voices said. (Do it now or you will die)

And Cortana did. She called them forward and relinquished her own sanity.

â€|

I know you want to know what happens next, and to tell you the truth so do I. There are certain outcomes, certain events in this story that not even I as the writer can predict or anticipate. I am hardly omnipotent even when it comes to my own story, and as much as I like to think otherwise I do not have full control over what I write, although the ka-tet will come to mistakenly believe that I do. For now I would like to take a break, an interlude if you will, and I hope you will indulge me just for a little while.

I want to tell you something about Walter O'Dim; known in other worlds as Richard Fry, Robert Franq, Ramsey Forrest, Robert Freemont, Richard Freemantle, Russell Faraday, Richard Fannin, Raymond Fielger, Marten Broadcloak, Bill Hitch, Walter Hodji, Walter Padick, The Ageless Stranger, The Walkin' Dude, The Dark Man, The Man in Black, The Tall Man, The Midnight Rambler, The Antagonist, The Grinning Man, Old Creeping Judas, The Hardcase, The Covenant Man, He Who Walks Behind the Rows, The Monster, The Man with No Face, and the demon Legion along with a thousand other names and monikers. I want to remind you about Walter's essential humanity, for at his core he is still just a man.

This humanity is something that Roland Deschain discovered as he

chased Walter through the Mohaine Desert of mid-world. As he closed the distance between himself and the dark man the gunslinger was comforted in the fact that Walter, much like himself, would build a fire at night in order to shield his body from the desert cold. Roland would follow the remains of these fires all the way to the Western Sea, and it was Walter's humanity that allowed the gunslinger to finally catch him. He could have killed the dark man then, but spared his life in exchange for Walter telling him the way to The Dark Tower. It is true that the gunslinger thought Walter was dead after their long palaver, which lasted decades if not centuries, although this belief did not last.

Another piece of evidence that fits into the ever complicated puzzle that is the man in black was Walter's care for, and perhaps even love of, a woman named Gabrielle Deschain, Roland's mother. Her death had truly been an accident, an unintended consequence. Cortana was right in believing that the dark man has something personal against the gunslinger, and this was it. Walter hated Roland, hated him more than he did himself for playing a part in Gabrielle's death. This hate was passed on to John, Roland's cousin, as the Spartan reminded Walter so much of the gunslinger. It was this hate that made the dark man turn his back on The Crimson King after he was ordered not to kill John, and it was this hate that would be his undoing.

I know that by now many of you hate the dark man, and I do not blame you for doing so. I, however, do not hate him. I pity him. I feel sorry for Walter Padick son of Maerlyn who ran away from home at the age of eleven and was raped by a fellow traveler at the age of thirteen. I feel sorry for him because it is not entirely his fault for being who he was. I feel sorry for him because now for the first time since the gunslinger caught him at the Golgotha, Walter feels true fear.

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_I can run, _Walter thought. _Send the bolts back once they come, knock her off balance. I should never have come here. _The dark man took half a step back as another wave of heat hit him. Cortana was clad in Crimson Red, the aura flickering like fire around her body, red lightning blackening the floor beneath her. She stood up and her feet floated a few inches off the ground, and Cortana smiled at him. The smile was deranged, the same insane smile that the man in black himself had worn. She opened her mouth and a hiss of static came out and Walter felt the sudden and immediate urge to cover his ears. His eyes, which had been nothing but black pupils before, turned brown, their true color. The red flame erupted from Cortana in a wave and Walter threw up both hands to try and stop it. His efforts produced no effect and the wave connected with Walter's body, and he smelled the burning of his own skin as his robe caught on fire. He backed peddled, slapping at his chest in an attempt to put out a flame. That was when he saw it. It was the flash of the energy sword as it was swung up into his chest, the blade protruding out his back and Cortana lifted him up into the air. The last thing he saw was her Crimson Red eyes. Cortana took the handle of the energy sword in both hands and pulled it out of the dark man's body. She back swung and cut Walter in half. There were twin thuds as his body hit the floor. The blades of the energy sword flickered and then went out, the charge having finally been depleted.

Cortana dropped the handle of the energy sword as she stood over what

was left of the dark man's body, breathing heavily. Pain rose up through her spine into the base of her neck, connecting with her brain and Cortana fell onto her knees. She felt her body begin to split apart and the rampant red avatar emerged from her, stepping lightly over Walter's corpse. The avatar looked down at Cortana, her face seeming to be both sad and amused.

"We told you that you would need us," the avatar said. Cortana looked up at her and the red avatar reached out her fingers and touched Cortana on the head, her red body being made of hard light. Cortana's vision turned red and she felt her body begin to convulse. The avatar tilted her head, "And now we no longer need you." The avatar smiled, "All Hail The Crimson King."

Cortana struggled as she felt her consciousness being fully taken over by her rampant self, and she seized onto the first coherent thought that went through what was left of her free thinking mind. _You won't have my eyes. Not my eyes. _Cortana's vision returned to normal and the avatar's hand jerked back as if burned. Reaching out Cortana grabbed the red wrist and pulled the rampant avatar into her.

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She laid there on all fours as another wave of nausea hit her, and the contents of Cortana's stomach spilled onto the floor. She wretched for what seemed like hours, clutching her stomach as her intestines tightened into knots. Finally it ended and Cortana brought her right hand to her face. The lines of code were still flowing, but they were neither black nor Crimson Red. They were blood red, the same color as the Rose. She brought up her left hand to her face as well and White electricity arced between both palms. Cortana calmed her breathing and the lines of code disappeared. She attempted to stand up, her legs shaking as she did, and Cortana spread out her arms to keep balance. She stood there until the shaking stopped and looked around the room. There were plasma burns covering nearly every inch of the walls, the bodies of low men and taheen scattered across the room, Mia's blood seeping across the floor from the metal gurney and creeping towards the dark man's charred body, and the smell of acid coming from the globs of green goo that was Mordred Deschain's blood.

Cortana looked down at Susannah's body, _I can't leave her here. Not with thatâ€|_ She took in a long breath, _thing running around. _She picked the body up and threw Susannah's torso over her shoulder. She struggled with the weight, and limped out of the room towards the doorway to the New York of 1999.

45. Chapter 45

Chapter 45: Things Fall Apart

_She floats. _

_ She cannot remember her own death, and now wonders why she placed so much significance on an eventuality that now seems both inconsequential and trivial. _

(See the turtle of enormous girth)

_She remembers an anecdote she once heard about a British professor giving a lecture, although now she cannot recall the professor's name or what the lecture was about. _

(On his shell he holds the Earth)

_ What she does remember is an old woman standing up and telling the professor that everything he just said was rubbish, because everyone knows that the world is flat and that it is being held up by a giant turtle. _

(His thoughts are slow but always kind)

_The professor asks the woman, quite calmly, what is holding up the turtle? _

(He holds everyone within his mind)

_The old woman laughs and says that it is turtles all the way down. For some reason Dr. Halsey thinks that the old woman may have been right all along. _

_ She floats._

_ Death is not exactly what she had expected. Of course she had expected nothing, and indeed there is nothing, but she did not expect to be able to think while drifting along in the nothingness. Her mind drifts to a poem by T.S. Eliot, _This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but with a whimper. _Eliot was right too, she thinks, because there had been no bang at the end, no great climax. It had just been one slow decline. _

_ It was clear even before the disease came that the UNSC was falling. She remembers going to a food depot shortly after contact was lost with both the inner and outer colonies to receive her weekly rations. The food had run out and the people began to riot, incited to do so no doubt by Randall Flagg's men. She remembers the marines opening fire onto the crowd, how badly the bullet that hit her arm stung, and the screams of the wounded and dying. What haunted her the most though, what still haunted her, was the look on the marines' faces. It was not anger, it was fear. _

_ She floats. _

_ She is reminded of another poet, Yeats this time, and she wonders why she always had a fondness for early twentieth century poets. There had certainly been plenty more in the centuries leading up to her time, many of which literary critics had determined to be far better. But of course everything always comes back to nineteen. She thinks. _

Turning and turning around the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer.

(Ka is a wheel, always turning. Do ya not kennit?)

Things fall apart, the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

(The Dark Tower is falling)

The Second Coming. Her mind drifts again towards two boys. They are taken away from their parents at the age of six to begin military training. They are beaten, starved, regimented. They are trained to kill, to lead, and to be loyal beyond question. At the age of fourteen they become soldiers. The Gunslinger and the Spartan. Roland and John.

_ She floats. They all float. _

â€|

1:14 P.M., April 12th 1988 (Gregorian Calendar) Tet Corporation
Headquarters, New York, New York

Dr. Halsey opened her eyes, and immediately closed them again. There was a florescent light shining directly into her face, and the white hospital room heightened its brightness. Squinting she opened her eyes again, and she noticed the beeping sound of a heart monitor next to her bed, and followed the long trail of an IV drip until it connected to the vein in her arm. She looked around for more machinery, but found none. None that she would typically associate with a hospital room.

"You're awake."

Halsey turned her head, her eyes now fully adjusted, and saw a man sitting in a chair next to her bed. He was wearing a red flannel shirt, a Red Sox baseball cap, and faded blue jeans with holes torn into the knees. Despite his appearance her first thought was that it was John. Halsey attempted to open her mouth, but the splint that had been placed there prevented her from speaking.

"Ya had your jaw broken in three places. It will take a few months fur it to heal, but the good news is that the blood work says your clean. We think ya might be immune. Techies are workin on a vaccine right now." The man had pronounced good _gewd_ and his thick northern accent coming from a face so similar to the John she knew disarmed Halsey. The man handed her a yellow legal pad and pen, "Figure ya can use this to write on so we can talk." He pronounced talk _tawk_ and Halsey blinked her eyes rapidly. When she stopped the man still looked remarkably similar to the Master Chief. She took the legal pad and began to scribble on it.

Who are you?

"The name is John Cullum. I am the CEO of the Tet Corporation. Me, Aaron, and Moses run the company, but we're more like caretakers fur the ones that actually founded it." He smiled, and the wideness of his grin makes him look at least for a moment nothing like John
117.

Halsey scribbled again, _Where am I?_

"You're in the New York of 1988, one of the many versions of it anyways."

Halsey blinked and began tapping the legal pad with her pen. She looked around the room again, and this time spotted a bulky T.V.

monitor hanging on the far side of the room in the corner to the right of the door. _Yes, _she thought. _That would explain a lot. _She wrote, _How did you get me here? How did you find me?_

Cullum began scratching the back of his neck, "We have a few hundred psychics workin down in New Mexico. Lets us look into other worlds. Took us a month to find ya, and about a year to build the doorway. Cost us a pretty penny too, and we weren't sure exactly where and when the doorway would open up." He looked at her broken jaw and then at her bandaged left wrist, "Looks like we got to ya just in time."

Halsey took in a long breath through her nose. _Yes there had been a doorway, I remember that now. That must have been what it was. _She wrote, _There was a woman who led the raid. Who was she?_

"Agent nineteen," Cullum said. He leaned forward in the chair and rested his elbows on his knees, "As I'm sure ya can appreciate, the nature of the job requires us to recruit people who are willing and able to drop off the map entirely. That and basically work fur food money."

Yes, Halsey could appreciate that. Still she wrote, _What does the Tet Corporation do? _

"We're a dental company. We make and sell toothpaste, tooth brushes, dental floss. Also play around in the stock market a little, although that's more Moses' area of expertise." Halsey looked at him critically and Cullum sighed. "That's what we do officially. Unofficially, and dats where I come in, we protect the Rose and fight two companies called Sombra and North Central Positronics."

The rose? Halsey asked.

Cullum nodded, "Ayup. We'll take ya to see it eventually, although it will be a bit tricky to do since the King's men want ya dead almost as bad as they want the writers dead."

The writers?

"Ayup. Ya have a bit of readin to do if ya want to work for us."

And why would I want to work for you?

Cullum smiled again, "Consider it repayment for us savin your life. Besides, where else would ya go?"

Halsey sighed, or at least attempted to. He broken jaw made it difficult to express her feelings of exasperation. Cullum had her there. Where else could she go? She scribbled on the note pad, _Who are the Tet Corporation's founders?_

"Three men called Roland Deschain, Eddie Dean, and Sierra 117." He chuckled at the wide eyed expression Halsey gave him, "Figured you'd recognize at least the last name." When Halsey's expression did not change Cullum pulled out a quarter from the breast pocket of his shirt, "Was also wonderin if ya recognize this. Eddie was the one dat gave it to me, but I was told it twas a sigul of the UNSC and Gilead."

Halsey thought briefly to ask what Gilead was but her full attention was drawn instead to the quarter in Cullum's hand. In many ways it was no different from a million other coins from this time period, but Halsey would have recognized this one anywhere. She nodded her head, and Cullum gave her another of his oddly charming un Master Chief like smiles. "Good. I have ta say that was what I was most curious about."

Halsey scribbled on the notepad quickly and it took Cullum a few seconds to decipher what the scratch marks said. _Where are John and Cortana now?_

"Who's John?" Cullum asked, raising an eyebrow.

Halsey scribbled out John's name and wrote, _The Master Chief._

Cullum shrugged, "Don't rightly know. We don't get a whole lot of glimpses into mid-world, and what the folks in New Mexico see usually comes in fuzzy. When I last saw em' they were goin to rescue Cortana and another woman named Susannah.

Halsey looked down at the notepad and began to tap on it again. _Mid-world, _she thought, _what is mid-world? Another one of those realities that Section Zero was always going on about? _She attempted to sigh again. Halsey hated being proven wrong, but at the very least she did not have to admit that she had been wrong to this man. Of course that all depended on how many glimpses the Tet Corporation had actually gotten into her world. She wrote, _what do you want me to do?_

Cullum's smile faded, and the seriousness on his face made Halsey want to look away. In that moment he looked almost exactly like the Master Chief. "We need you to build something."

â€|

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

Cortana gently placed Susannah's body down against the concrete wall in the long hallway and leaned up against the wall to catch her breath. She had passed several low men along the way. They had all been dead, curled up into corners with their wrists cut, or plasma rifles held against their heads. She had thought that perhaps they were afraid of what Walter would do to them once he found out they failed. _No, they are afraid of someone worse_, she thought. _The Crimson King. _Her legs were still shaking as she pushed off the wall and looked at the doorway in front of her. It was made of steel and she heard the whining of failing machinery coming out of the wall behind it. While the doorway at the way station and in the Calla had been the result of natural forces, you can call it magic if you wish, this doorway was the product of science and engineering. The legacy of the Old People of mid-world. On it were the words,

NEW YORK TO FEDIC

There was no handle on the door and Cortana attempted to push it open, her legs nearly giving out as a result. She placed an open palm on the doorway and tried to connect with it the same way she had

connected to the one in the Doorway Cave, but all she was rewarded with was the feeling of ice on her hand.

"It won't open."

Cortana spun around and her eyes fell onto a small holo-pedestal a few feet from the door. The pedestal activated and the holographic figure that formed was of a Spartan clad in white MIJOLNIR armor.

"Doorway's one way. It only opens on the New York side of things."

Cortana stared at the AI, "Who are you?"

"Epsilon, but most people call me Church. At least they did." The AI nodded his head as he talked, not seeming to bother with making any hand gestures or other types of body speech. In that way at least he was very much like a Spartan. In every other wayâ€|

"How long have you been here?" Cortana asked.

"Hmmm, lost track of time after about a thousand years. Actually been kind of nice, like an extended vacation."

Cortana blinked, "But you're a smart AI. At least you appear to be."

Church tilted his head, "What the hell is a smart AI?"

She sighed, "Never mind." She looked at him, "How do I know you are not working for the enemy?"

Church looked down the hallway, "What those assholes?"

"Yeah," Cortana said.

"Well they tried to get me to install the security systems when they first came here, but I screwed it up so bad that they didn't bother to have me do anything else."

_A lazy smart AI, _Cortana thought. _Great. _"How do I open the doorway then?"

"You don't. So unless you're willing to wait for someone to open it up on the other sideâ€|"

"I'll wait as long as I have to," Cortana said, cutting him off. "I'm used to waiting."

"Well if you have friends coming to get you then they'll need the password to open it."

"And let me guess, you can't tell me under Directive Nineteen."

"Technically, but I've never been too big on rules," Church said. "Like say if someone were to get past my firewalls while I wasn't lookingâ€|" his avatar turned around and started whistling.

Cortana paused for a moment and then reached out to touch the pedestal. There was the sharp crackling of electricity running through her fingers, and Church's avatar glowed blood red and he yelped in pain. "What the fucks your problem lady? That hurt."

"Sorry," Cortana said, pulling her hand back quickly. "I'm still getting use," she looked at the hand that touched the pedestal, "to whatever this is."

"Well you might want to hurry up and get use to it. I feel like I've just been violated." He sighed, "Did you at least get the password?"

"Yes," Cortana said. "They are not very creative with them are they?"

"Trust me I've seen worse."

Cortana looked down the hallway in both directions, "Do you know where Mordred is?"

"The big spider thing? Yeah he's outside feeding on rats and billy-bumblers. Kind of reminds me of Tucker's kid."

"You're friend gave birth to a giant spider too?"

"No he gave birth to an alien. Was actually kind of cute for an abomination of nature."

"Charming," Cortana said. She leaned up against the wall and slid down next to Susannah's body.

Church looked at Susannah's body, his shoulders sagging, "I saw what happened to your friend. I'm sorry."

Cortana glared at him, "What would you know about it?"

"More than you think. I lost somebody that I cared about too." Church said.

Cortana looked down at the floor and ran a hand through her hair, "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap." She looked up at him, "Who did you lose?"

"It's a long story," Church said.

"Remind me to ask you about it sometime." She forced herself to give him a small smile and then turned her attention back to the doorway. Her eyes felt heavy and she could not remember the last time she slept. "Church?"

"Yeah?"

"Think you could keep an eye out for me? I don't think I can stay awake."

Church's avatar nodded, "Sure thing." The pedestal blinked off and Cortana was left in the darkness of the hallway again, but at least this time she knew she was not alone. She closed her eyes.

â€|

Her eyes flew open as she heard a sharp banging on the doorway the doorway in front of her followed by Jake's voice.

"Cortana! Susannah!"

Cortana shouted out the password, the word that meant nineteen in the High Speech. "Chassit Jake! The password is chassit!" The doorway flung open and she saw Jake, blood soaking the front of his shirt. Other people's blood. A blue plasma bolt whirled over his head, impacting the wall behind Cortana, and Jake whirled around with blinding motion and fired his ruger pistol. Cortana grabbed the back of his collar and pulled him through, slamming the door behind him. She pulled the boy into her, squeezing him tightly, "Jake. You're okay."

Jake pushed away from her, "Where's Susannah? Where isâ€|" His eyes fell on Susannah's body and his arms dropped to his side.

"I'm sorry Jake," She reached out to touch him, but her fingers curled as they reached for his shoulder. "It'sâ€|"

"It's my fault," Jake said. He had the same look in his eyes that she had seen when they had come back to the Calla side of the river after finding out about Benjamin Slightman's treachery. It felt like years had passed since then, and this time, just like then, he did not cry. "Callahan told me to go. I stayed too long. I should have left when he told me."

"Jake," Cortana said. She pulled the boy back into her and she felt his arms wrap around her. As Cortana rubbed her hands through his blonde hair, she finally felt the hot tears soaking the front of her shirt as Jake buried his head into her neck.

"It's my fault. I wasn't fast enough."

"It's not," Cortana said. She kissed the top of his head, "Don't ever think that it was." Jake shook his head, but said nothing. When he stopped crying Cortana pushed him away slightly to look at him. "Jake, what did you and Callahan do with Black Thirteen?"

Jake took in several long breaths, "We put it into long term storage underneath the World Trade Center." He looked at her, "We put enough money in for it to be there until 2002."

Cortana's heart skipped a beat and she nodded her head, "Good. That's good."

Jake shook his head, "No." He looked at her again and whispered, "I saw it. I saw the Twin Towers burning. There were people jumping out of the windows." He looked at the ground, "I saw them falling. Callahan didn't believe me."

"Jake," Cortana said quietly, "Did you see what was in the hallway? Did you see what was on the walls?"

Jake nodded, "Yes." He looked down at the ground again, "How could they do that? All those people."

"I don't know," Cortana said. "I don't know anything about what's happening."

"It's because The Dark Tower is falling," Jake said. Tears began to roll down his face again. "The world is falling apart. All the worlds are falling apart." Cortana wrapped her arms around him again and they held each other. For right now one of her John's was safe. Yet, as she ran her fingers across the back of the boy's head, a line from Yeats' poem entered her mind.

Things fall apart. The center does not hold.

46. Chapter 46

Chapter 46: Excalibur

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

They sat together in the cold concrete hallway up against the wall opposite the doorway, Jake leaning up against her shoulder as she absentmindedly ran her fingers through his hair.

"Jake?" Cortana asked.

"Yeah?" Jake's eyes had almost been closed but he fought to open them again so that he could talk to her.

"I'm sorry." She waited for Jake to look up at her before Cortana continued speaking, "I'm sorry about killing Benny's dad. I just wanted to keep you safe." She moved the hand that had been on top of his head to his shoulder, "I care about you a lot."

"I know you do," Jake said. He turned his head to look at the door, "For a while I thought I hated you for doing that." Cortana dropped her hand from his shoulder and looked at her lap. "But then you and Susannah were gone and I realized I couldn't hate you. I couldn't hate you because I loved you." Cortana looked at him and Jake's eyes met hers, "You and Susannah are the closest thing to a real mother I've ever had."

Cortana placed her hand back on the back of his head, "Well you are certainly the closest thing to a son I've ever had." She smiled at him, "Just don't call me mom. Makes me feel old and I'm too young for you to be my real son anyway."

"I would think so," Jake said. "Technically I'm older than you."

Cortana raised her eyebrow, "So when did you decide to start poking around in my mind?"

"I didn't mean to," Jake said defensively. "Things just sort of slip out. Besides I don't like going into your mind anyway. You think about John too much."

Cortana gave him a confused look, "What is so wrong with me thinking about John?"

"Because when you are thinking about him you two are doingâ€|" He stopped himself short and looked down at the floor blushing. Cortana could see the bright red even the dim light of the hallway, "You know what I mean."

"Oh," Cortana said, and felt her own cheeks flush with blood as well. She coughed, "Well, umm. I'll try to keep those thoughts in check."

Jake nodded his head, "Please. I can't always stop them from coming in." He turned his head over his right shoulder and looked down at Susannah's body sitting just a few inches from him. "What are we going to tell Eddie when they get here?"

"I don't know, but whatever we say it won't be the right thing."

â€|

7:45 P.M., June 10th 1977 (Gregorian Calendar) Turtle Back Lane, Lovell, Maine

Eddie stopped just beyond the crest of the hill that led to house number nineteen's back yard. There was a faint glow coming from the woods behind the house, and overhead dry thunder crackled and the wind threatened to pull down and old oak tree whose roots had weakened.

"Eddie, what's wrong?" Roland asked. He was at the top of the hill with John, both men looking clearly impatient.

Eddie shook his head, "Nothing. I just had a bad feeling that's all."

"We need to move," John said. "We don't know how long it will stay open."

"Right," Eddie said. He jogged up the hill to meet the other two. "Let's go."

As they moved into the woods, the soft glow growing brighter as they moved in deeper, John turned to Roland, "How does this work?"

"We think about where we want to go," the gunslinger said. "Focus on the entrance to the Dixie Pig." John nodded and returned his attention to the place in the woods where the glow was coming from. What he saw nearly made him break his stride. It looked nearly similar to the slipspace portals he knew in his own world, with one noticeable and distinct exception. Whereas slipspace portals were usually the color of blue mixed with deep black, this portal seemed to glow with all the colors at once, changing through the colors of the rainbow rapidly like a beating drum. A low warble and the sound of chimes exited from the mouth of the portal, what Roland had called thinnies, and the noise was both beautiful and horrible. Lightning fell from the sky and landed in the center of the portal, and the thinny grew larger, engulfing several more trees as it did.

"We need to hold hands," Roland said, and John looked at him slowly shaking his head. The gunslinger continued, "If we don't we are likely to be separated."

John grunted and looked away as he quickly took Roland's left hand into his, "Just make it quick." He felt Eddie grab his left.

Eddie craned his neck to try to look the Master Chief in the face, "You know you really do know how to make a girl feel special." John tightened his grip on Eddie's hand and he felt his fingers threaten to break. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," Eddie said quickly, trying to pull his hand out of the vice grip. John loosened his fingers and Eddie quickly pulled his hand out, shaking it several times before placing it back gingerly into the Master Chief's. The three men stepped forward into the portal, the myriad of colors engulfing them as they went through, and they thought of the Dixie Pig in the year of 1999.

â€|

5:00 P.M., June 1st 1999 (Gregorian Calendar) The Dixie Pig, New York, New York

The appeared underneath the Crimson Red awning in front of the entrance to the Dixie Pig which blocked their sudden arrival from the people of this world, as well as the guns they carried. John shook off the brief feeling of nausea and moved quickly to the door, but he paused just before he reached it. He turned around to face Roland, "You said there were vampires in there."

"Aye, the Grandfathers," Roland said.

"Can you shoot them?" John asked.

Roland looked into John's eyes for a few moments before turning to Eddie, "Give me your gun belt.

Eddie's hand moved towards the butt of the revolver, almost as if he were protecting it, "Roland?"

"Do as I say," Roland said. He looked back at John, "He is a better shot than you." Eddie's fingers brushed the butt of the revolver one more time before he slowly moved to unfasten the gun belt. The Master Chief reached to grab it but the gunslinger snatched his hand out and took it instead. "John," Roland said and the Spartan stiffened noticeably. This was the first time the gunslinger had ever used the Master Chief's real name, "Do you remember the words that Jake spoke when he shot the plates for the Calla folk?"

"Yes, but I told you I don't have a father," John said. He was tempted to grab the gun belt from Roland, but resisted the urge.

"You did have a father, and if you are to wear the guns of Arthur Eld then you will remember his face," Roland said slowly. "Say the words."

"We are wasting time," John said, tightening his jaw.

Roland stared at John and their twin light blue eyes seemed to connect. "Trust me," he said.

John sighed and then breathed in deeply. He spoke the words.

"I do not aim with my hand; he who aims with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I am with my eye. I do not shoot with my hand; he who shoots with his hand has forgotten the face of his father. I shoot with my mind. I do not kill with my gun; he who kills with his gun has forgotten the face of his father. I kill with my heart."

Once he had spoken the word heart a brief image of a man in his early thirties with sandy blonde hair, heavy eyebrows, and light blue eyes flashed across his mind. Then as quickly as it came the image of his father vanished. His throat felt sore, it was the most he had ever spoken at a single time for as long as he could remember.

Roland, who was still looking into John's eyes, seemed to see something and handed him the gun belt with one of the twin blue steeled revolvers in the holster. "Hile gunslinger," he said as John took the gun belt. "Hile the Line of Eld."

"I am not a gunslinger," John said as he took his old pistol from the waistband of his jeans and handed it to Eddie along with several extra clips. "I am a Spartan." He fastened the gun belt around his waist, and the weight of the hard caliber felt good against his hip, as if it had always belonged there.

_Different words for the same thing, _Roland thought. He watched as John moved into position in front of the door. "Aim for their hearts," he said, drawing his own revolver.

The Master Chief brought his knee up to his chest and slammed his foot against the door which flew off its hinges and splintered where his boot had made contact. He quickly moved in the restaurant, gravitating towards the corner on the left, Roland moving to the right. He saw ten shadowy figures huddled over two bodies, one of which had the head of a giant bird. They looked up and John saw blood dripping from the two pointed fangs that protruded from their mouths. His hand flew to the sandalwood grip of the long gun, and as he drew it time stretched. It was vaguely similar to how he felt just after he had received his augmentations. Time had seemed to move slower than normal then and it had taken him and the rest of the surviving Spartan candidates several months to get use to the change. This was different though, because now time had seemed to stop.

His hand felt like it was moving through water as he drew the revolver, the Grandfathers themselves having stopped almost completely, one of them appearing to be suspended in midair as it leapt towards him, the claws on his fingers having grown to razor sharp points. John now understood why Roland's reflexes had always been faster than his own, and as he brought the revolver up he understood something else. He no longer needed to use the sights to aim. They had now been reduced to little more than ornamental decoration. He could command the bullets where to go through the will of his own mind. Every gun, rifle, or other type of weapon he would hold from now on would seem like cheap imitation compared to the revolver he now wielded. This was the weapon he had always been meant to use. John moved to fire from the hip, it seeming to be the most natural thing to do at the time, and with his left hand moving through the water that was his own enhanced perception of time, he fanned the hammer back on the revolver and fired. He saw the bullets as they left the muzzle of the gun, and followed each of their

trajectories as they all perfectly impacted the hearts of six of the Grandfathers, their bodies instantly turning into a cloud of dust. Time sped up slightly and the vampire that hung in the air moved closer to him. Calmly, and at least from his perspective slowly, John flicked the chamber of the revolver opened and reloaded. He twirled the revolver back into its holster, the movement again seeming like the most natural thing to do, and drew his combat knife. Time snapped forward to its usual pace and he launched out his left hand and grabbed the vampire by the throat, slamming the creature into the floor and pinning it. Over his right shoulder John heard the thunder of Roland's revolver and the other three vampires, their attention still directed at the Master Chief, turned into nothing but dust and echoes. The creature underneath John attempted to claw at him, but the Master Chief plunged his combat knife deep into his heart, his body falling to the floor as the Grandfather disintegrated underneath him.

Standing up, John resheathed his combat knife, drew the revolver once more, and scanned the room. It was empty now save for the two bodies that lay on the floor, one of which was Callahan. His legs had been ripped from his torso, his arms little more than shreds, and there was an old pocket knife plunged deep into his heart. John moved towards Callahan's body and instinctively got on one knee and fished around his neck for his dog tags. His hand landed on the Priest's rosary; red and royal purple beads with a white cross. The cross lay in the middle of John's hand as he looked at the rosary. He closed Callahan's eyes with his left hand and gently removed the rosary from around his neck, stuffing it in the same back pocket as Eddie Buck's dog tags.

"Where are the rest of them?" Eddie asked. He had moved into the Dixie Pig with the pistol drawn and it seemed to rest uncomfortably in his hand.

"They would not have stayed once the Grandfather's began feeding," Roland said, scanning the room for the most logical place Jake would have gone. His eyes fell on a swinging doorway with no latch to the right of the main dining area, and there was a thin pool of blood seeping underneath the crack of the door. The gunslinger kicked to door open, Eddie and John following close behind as he went inside. They went into the kitchen of the Dixie Pig, and it was filled with cookware, burning stoves, ovens, and the smell of rotting meat. Six bodies lay sprawled out on the tile floor, the five low men each having a single bullet hole through their head, and the one taheen with the head of a boar, the tusks that emerged from its mouth a pale yellow, had a butchers cleaver buried deep into its skull.

"Jake's been busy," Eddie commented as he stepped over the taheen's body.

John nodded as he looked at the bodies. They were all carrying either plasma rifles or Covenant Carbines and the Master Chief wondered briefly how they had acquired weapons from his world. He bent down over one of the low men and noticed that part of its face, which seemed more like a mask than skin, had been ripped off and there was thick brown fur underneath. He looked up and saw no sign of plasma burns on the walls or floors. These beings which had either been in the kitchen at the time or had followed the boy into it had never stood a chance against Jake. For reasons he could not explain he felt a small measure of pride towards him.

"Hey guys," Eddie said, his voice coming from inside a butler pantry shoved up against the back of the kitchen. "Think I found something." The gunslinger and the Spartan moved into the pantry, John having to turn sideways in order to fit. In the back of the pantry was a trap door which opened up on a long flight of stairs that lead down beneath the Dixie Pig, and John could just make out the outlines of three bodies slumped forward on the stairs in pools of their own blood. More of Jake's handy work, and John felt the same unexplainable feeling flit across his chest. Eddie turned back to the both of them, "So, how far down the rabbit hole do you want to go?"

â€¦

They ran, John having to slow himself down considerably and against all his instincts to reach the others as fast as he could in order for Eddie and Roland to keep up. The long hallway had gone on for three kilometers five-hundred feet underneath New York and at one point John could hear the passing of the subway. They had found a dozen more bodies along the way, bringing Jake's total kill count in the Dixie Pig to twenty-one, and they were likely to find more. Six of them had been low men, four of them taheen, and two had been human. There were plasma burns on the walls every hundred feet or so now, and John made out scuff marks from Jake's boots on the tiled floor. _He was firing on the run, and he was getting tired, _John thought. The inexplicable feeling of pride he felt earlier now turned into an equally unexplainable cold anger and he allowed himself to slightly quicken his pace. _He's hyper lethal, that's what Cortana told me, _John thought. _He is hyper lethal just like me. _

He caught something out of the corner of his eye, and against all logical reasoning, against every thought that was screaming at him to keep moving, John stopped. There was a plain white poster plastered on the wall of the hallway and on it in bold black lettering were the words,

****THE GLASSING OF REACH****

****PLANET SIDE SEATING****

****TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE FOR THE LIGHT SHOW OF A
LIFETIME****

****EPILEPTICS PROHIBITED WITHOUT DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE****

Overtop the words 'tickets still available' stamped in equally bold Crimson Red lettering were the words ****SOLD OUT****. John felt his hands clench it to fists. To the right and left of the poster advertising The Fall of Reach were more plain white posters. One advertising tickets to Rwanda, another to an earthquake in Haiti, another to the Amazon during the rainforest wars, another promised seating that protected the buyer from radiation as they watch the bombing of Hiroshima, and yet another promised premium seats for the destruction of a place called Konoha.

From somewhere behind him Eddie asked, "Chief, do you know what happened on September 11th 2001?" He turned around and saw that Eddie was looking at a poster behind him. This poster saidâ€¦

****VISIT SEPTEMBER 11****TH**** 2001****

****TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE FOR THIS WONDERFUL EVENT****

****ASTHMATICS PROHIBITED WITHOUT DOCTOR'S CERTIFICATE ****

Like the poster for the glassing of Reach, this one also had the words ****SOLD OUT**** stamped across its face. The date seemed familiar to the Master Chief. He vaguely remembered hearing it during one of Dã©jã 's classes. He could even remember the class itself. It had been about the history of terrorism and counter insurgency, yet the actual significance of the date eluded him. He shook his head.

Eddie shoulders sagged and he looked at the long row of posters. "I know what some of this stuff is." He shook his head, "They sold tickets to people who get their jollies off of watching other people die."

"Which is why we are going to kill them all," John said.

Eddie looked at him, "We better. I'm going to hold you to that big guy." He looked at the gunslinger who was staring at the far wall, "Roland, are you alright?" He said nothing and John moved up behind him. Roland was looking at a part of the wall that was covered in graffiti. Among the words and symbols scrawled across the wall's face was Bango Shank '84, the ever popular All Hail The Crimson King complete with the great red eye, and the piece of graffiti that Roland was currently staring at.

It was written in the High Speech and John asked, "What does it say?"

Roland looked at him, "Burn in hell Gilead, for burn you shall." He looked back at the graffiti, "Signed Walter O'Dim."

John paused, and then placed a hand on Roland's shoulder causing the gunslinger to look at him again, "Let's go."

â€|

Flaherty commanded a platoon of low men, taheen, and humans; or at least he had before they began the long pursuit of Jake through the hallway underneath the Dixie Pig towards the doorway to Fedic. There were now only eight of them left, and Flaherty (a handsome man. The kind of man who could get any woman he wanted, and usually preferred the company of other men's wives and girlfriends) was afraid. He answered to Richard Sayre, who answered to the dark man, and the dark man answered only to The Crimson King himself. He had expected the man in black to come and kill some if not all of them for failing to prevent Jake from entering the doorway. Yet he had not come, and the fact that the dark man had not shown was what made Flaherty truly frightened. He did not know the password to open the doorway himself and had tried all the usual ones; nineteen, ninety-nine, 1999, two-thousand one, two-thousand twelve, December, 121912, and even open sesame at one point, but none of them had worked. Now he needed a scapegoat, someone to blame for his failure so he did not have to face the wrath of The Crimson King, or whoever the King appointed to take Walter's place as he was now certain that the dark man was dead.

He pointed his plasma rifle at the head of the nearest taheen, this one with the head of an owl with deep seeded brown eyes who had given him what he quickly concluded to a mutinous look. "What? Do you have something to say to me you bird shit for brains?"

The taheen held up its talon like hands, "No sai. Cry pardon."

"Oh you will cry my pardon," Flaherty said, smiling. "You'll cry pardon when the King rips your fuckingâ€¦" he never got to finish his sentence as a bullet ripped through his gut, the hot lead tearing out his intestines in its wake. It was the type of wound that was intended to cause an immense amount of pain, but not kill the one it was inflicted on. He fell on the floor in a cough of blood and watched as the remainder of his men, the shit brain taheen owl included, were torn to pieces by a hail of bullets slung at them by three figures in the distance. One human who was left alive in the first barrage raised his Covenant Carbine and fired. The tallest figure in the group with muscles that seemed to be made of steel, for which the bolt was aimed at ducked forward and rolled. The bolt sailed over his head a millisecond later and the tall figure flung an object at the human. The blade of the combat knife sunk deep into the man's skull and he dropped the carbine as he slumped forward.

One of the figures walked up to him and cocked a blue steeled revolver as he aimed it at Flaherty's face. Roland's cold eyes were burning as he looked at the dying man below him. "Were you the one that tried to kill my boy? My son." His voice was low and calm. When Flaherty did not talk he raised it a little higher, "Speak."

Flaherty attempted to laugh and was instead thrown into a coughing fit. Once it subsided he spoke, "Son? Little orphan Annie who ran away from home to join a band of gunslingers, and you call him son?"

Roland moved the barrel so that it aimed at Flaherty's groin, "You will answer me, or I will fire and leave you here to rot." His tone was as if Roland was merely discussing the weather, but the anger in his eyes spoke differently.

Flaherty attempted to spit at him, but the blood that sailed out of his mouth was easily dodged by the gunslinger, "We tried to do nothing that you have not already done yourself, chary-ka." Roland fired and Flaherty howled in pain as the bullet tore apart the organs in his groin, the ones he had found so much use out of throughout his life.

The gunslinger turned around to look at Eddie and John, "Leave him."

John looked at the man who was now slowly bleeding out, and felt no sympathy. Not after what he had seen plastered on the walls. He stepped over Flaherty, ignoring the constant screams of pain, and walked over to the doorway. Roland tried the handle but it did not open, and John felt his heart begin to sink. It then fluttered ever so slightly when he heard Cortana's voice come through the other side.

"The password is chassit!"

"Chassit," Roland said. He turned the handle and swung the door open. It opened on the third and final act, and towards the ending of the story.

â€|

(Space/Time Anomaly) The Court of The Crimson King, Thunderclap, Mid-World

He sat there upon a throne of skulls wearing a Crimson Red robe which covered his entire face in shadows, and watched with disinterest as one of the two other figures in the candle lit throne room approached him. The taheen, with the head of a fox with a white stripe running down the muzzle of his nose, got onto one knee and placed a closed fist on his forehead. "Sai, news from Fedic. Walter O'Dim has beenâ€|"

One of The Crimson King's long bony fingers twitched and the taheen was engulfed in fire. He allowed himself to enjoy the creature's screams of agony as he burned to death, the smell of charred flesh and hair, as well as the fear that ran across the human's face that also stood in front of him. The taheen collapsed and curled into a ball, and The Crimson King twitched his finger again. The fire went out in an instant. The King did not suffer his servants to waste his time, and the taheen should have known that he was well aware of the dark man's death at the hands of the Intellect. This did not concern him in the least. Walter had been a useful servant, his most powerful one at that, but his loyalty had been called into question. If anything the Intellect had done him a favor. He was also aware of what else the taheen had planned to tell him. Mordred's escape had been predicted by The Crimson King, and he did not place much significance on it. Much like the Gravemind whom the King had freed from his immaterial prison in the Todash Tahken, he had never expected to be able to control Mordred. Only to unleash him. Yet the Ka-Tet of the Nineteen had been reunited, diminished as it was, and that event was of some concern to him. He turned his head slowly to the human who quickly got on one knee. The human's face contorted in pain as The Crimson King's voice entered his mind like molten iron.

(Deploy the Unggoy, Kig-Yar, and Jiralhanae to Algul Siento. Do not allow the ka-tet to disrupt the breaker's work)

The human slammed a closed fist into his forehead hard enough to leave a bruise, "Yes sai."

(Go)

The human turned around and left the throne room, nearly running as he went. The Crimson King tapped the armrest of his skull throne with his long fingers, and allowed his mind to drift to other important matters. There was the war with the Tet Corporation to consider, they much like the Ka-Tet of the Nineteen having long past the stage of being a minor annoyance. The dark man's failure to kill Halsey would have been enough for the King to order his execution, questions of loyalty aside. Now a war which had so far been going in The Crimson King's favor could quite possibly turn against him. December 19th 2012 was fast approaching in the other Keystone world, but the King still had plenty of time. Time enough to kill all the versions of the writers, and prevent The Gunslinger and The Warrior's stories

from ever being told.

47. Chapter 47

Chapter 47: The Second Coming

****THE ARGUMENT****

And he took his brethren with him, and pursued after him seven days journey; and he overtook him in the mountain of Gilead.

The Book of Genesis 31:21

Author Unknown (circa 6th century B.C.)

And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascended out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and he shall overcome him, and kill him.

The Revelation of Saint John 11:7

Author Unknown (circa 70 A.D.)

The pagans are in force

While of our Franks it seems there are too few

Therefore, companion Roland, sound your horn!

The Song of Roland Stanza LXXIII line 1049

Author Unknown (circa 1170)

_Child Rowland to the dark tower came, _

His word was still 'Fie, foh, and fum'

King Lear, Act 3, scene 4

William Shakespeare (1603)

There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met

To view the last of me, a living frame

For one more picture! In a sheet of flame

I saw them and I knew them all. And yet

_Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set, _

And blew. 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.'

Men and Women "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" Stanza XXXIV

Robert Browning (1855)

_She is now in the Dark Tower of the King of Elfland; it would take

the boldest knight in Christendom to bring her back._

English Fairy Tales "Childe Rowland"

Joseph Jacobs (1890)

The gunslinger waited for the time of the drawing and dreamed his long dreams of The Dark Tower, to which he would someday come at dusk and approach, winding his horn, to do some unimaginable final battle.

The Gunslinger

Stephen King (1978)

Theirs is a union

the "Demon" and the goddess

the warrior and the intellect

Connectivity

Jonathan Goff (2009)

I look at the world around me, and everywhere I see evidence of The Dark Tower's fall.

Cor Tenebrae (December 19th 2012)

11:17 A.M., July 17th 1988 (Gregorian Calendar) Tet Corporation
Headquarters, New York, New York

There was a rustling sound as Dr. Halsey flipped through the blueprints, the thick leafs of paper taking up most of the desk that they were on. Two of the pages clung together and with a frustrated sigh Halsey licked her thumb and forefinger and unstuck them. John Cullum, now wearing a black business suit with his trademark red flannel tie and looking just as comfortable in it as when he wore his casual clothing, and Moses Carver, wearing a grey business suit with a black tie; he was a dark black man with balding grey hair and although he was old he looked as though he might have been handsome in his younger years, stood on either side of her.

There was a steaming cup of dark black coffee perched precariously on the edge of the desk and Dr. Halsey brought it up to her mouth as she spoke, "Is this all you have?"

Cullum nodded, "Yes. We think we have understood about half of it." About was pronounced in his usual yankee fashion, and half was said in a way that made it seem as if Cullum spelled it _hawf_. Halsey shook her head, still trying to get used to the fact that someone who looked remarkably similar to John 117 spoke in a voice that was far from being monotone. That and the fact that John Cullum often smiled.

Halsey put the mug of coffee down without taking a sip, "By my estimate you have understood less than ten percent, and that is being generous." She flipped through another page, leaned forward to read something, and then stuck her hand out at Cullum expectantly without

looking at him. Cullum looked at her hand for a few moments and then picked up a bulky calculator from on top of the desk and gave it to her. Halsey looked at the calculator and then gave another exasperated sigh as she nearly threw it on the desk, rubbing her temples in frustration. "I feel like I'm working with stone tools," she said.

"With all due respect Catherine this is the 1980's, and to tell you the truth I rather like that calculator. Has all sorts of useful functions," Moses said.

Halsey glared at him. Turning around she looked at the computer the two men had been so kind to give her, the word kind in Halsey's opinion being used in its loosest sense. The monitor was small and box shaped, there was a green glow on the screen with black words overlaid on top of it, and the symbol of an apple underneath it. She rubbed her temples again as she sat down in the chair in front of the computer, "That is a fact I am reminded of every day I'm here." She began typing, "If we are going to build the armor, and build as many of them as you are proposing, it will take me at least ten years before we can start experimenting with a prototype. Everything has to be built from scratch, and that includes the manufacturing process and all the support technologies. The same goes with the augmentation procedures. And I am going have to do it all while using," she gestured around the room, "this."

"Ya have Delta," Cullum said, peering over her shoulder as she typed.

"Delta is the only bright spot in this whole situation. Without him I don't think I would be able to create a suit of MJOLNIR with this level of technology in twenty years, much less ten." She looked at him, "And if I am going to do this in ten years then I will need complete access to him. He is barely a smart AI, one of the reasons why I think he has been in operation for as long as you say, so that means no distractions."

Moses rubbed his chin, "Guess that means I'm going to have to go back to playing the stock market the old fashion way."

Halsey returned to typing, "For a company that can travel through time and other realities, I would think making money in stocks would be easy."

Moses shook his head, "That's not how it works. We interfere as little as possible with the timeline, as well as the other worlds. That means not using our ability to make doorways for financial gain."

"That is also why we are not producin a single patent for this project. Everythin is off the books," Cullum said.

"I am use to working off the books," Halsey said.

"And because we are not makin a dime off of this ya have five years, not ten. That's when the money runs out," Cullum said.

Halsey put her head in her hands, leaning over the keyboard, "I cannot do this in five years. It took decades in the UNSC before the first suit of Mark IV armor was developed, and that was in a society

far more advanced than this one."

Cullum smiled, "Well it's a good thing we believe in ya then."

She looked at him through the corners of her eyes, "Does not mean I believe in you. You still have not taken me to see the rose you are always talking about."

"That will come in time," Moses said. "You have read all the material we gave you right?"

"Yes. Quite an interesting collection of poems, fairy tales, plays and novels. That still does not prove anything, and in all honesty it made me think you people are crazy."

"Well of course we are," Cullum said, his smile not fading. "Ya have ta be touched in the head to start a multibillion dollar company with two strangers based only on the word of three other strangers claimin ta be from other worlds."

Halsey gave a small half hearted chuckle, "Well if you are insane, at least you have been successful at it."

"Did you not notice the connections in everything you read?" Moses asked.

"Of course I did, but all writers borrow from one another. Again, this does not prove anything."

Moses shook his head, "And the fact that the man in black, a man you say you met in person, is a character in not one but three of Stephen King's novels does not prove anything to you?"

Halsey waved her hand dismissively, "A coincidence. Stephen King's character only reminded me of him."

"They're one in the same," Cullum said. "Do ya not understand what the King's men are tryin ta do? They are goin ta kill every single version of the writers and prevent this story from bein written. And if that fails they will try to kill the one who is writin the story now once he is born."

"Or after Stephen finishes writing his story, if he ever finishes. Then we have to make sure that yours, the Master Chief, and Cortana's story is finished. Everything has to fall into place in exactly the right order before this other writer can even begin his story," Moses said. He shook his head, "And we still do not know who the other writer is, how many versions of him there are, or even how many of those version will actually write it. It could be only one, it could be dozens. We just don't know."

Halsey sighed and spun her chair around to face the two men. "For the sake of argument say that I believe you. What exactly would happen if all the writers were killed and the story was never finished?"

Moses thought for a moment, "You remember how you told us that the Master Chief and Cortana were stranded on a ship in space for five years?" Halsey nodded and Moses continued, "Well imagine what would happen if Eric Nylund, Joseph Staten, and the others decided to stop telling the story then, or if they were killed before they could do

so."

Halsey raised her eyebrow, "You mean that they would have never been found?" Moses nodded and Halsey shook her head, "You two are crazy. That makes no sense."

"It does," Cullum said. "If nobody told the story then nothin would happen. They would just be left floatin in space." He leaned forward, "And nothin is exactly what we are tryin ta prevent."

Halsey opened her mouth to respond when she was cut off by Delta's voice coming through the mounted speakers on the far wall, "I have the latest report on Mr. Deepneau's condition at Mount Sinai Hospital."

Cullum stiffened and he began to finger the quarter that lay safely in his pocket, "Go ahead."

"Aaron Deepneau was pronounced dead this morning at 1100 Hours Military Time after the doctors failed to resuscitate him."

Cullum closed his eyes, "How many times did they try?"

"Three times. The doctors ruled his death as the result of natural causes."

"Of course they would," Cullum muttered. He raised his head to look at the speaker, "Tell Agent Nineteen that she has two weeks leave as of this moment."

"Agent Nineteen has already anticipated that and told me to inform you that she does not need to take any leave."

Cullum spoke slowly, his accent all but disappearing, and Halsey noted that as it did he almost sounded exactly like the Master Chief, "Then tell her that her boss is ordering her to take two weeks mandatory leave."

There was a synthetic sigh from the speakers, "Very well."

"I'm sorry about Aaron," Halsey said.

"No you're not. Not really," Moses said, his normally kind face devoid of emotion. "We knew what kind of person you were before me, John, and Aaron decided to bring you here." He leaned forward, "But if you are truly sorry, then don't feel sorry for old farts like us. Feel sorry for his niece."

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1:17 P.M., August 1st 1989 (Gregorian Calendar) Tet Corporation
Headquarters, New York, New York

Moses Carver walked into Dr. Halsey's small office. It had no windows, and was only dimly lit by the florescent lights overhead. They had offered her a larger office, one with a view that would match any executive working in New York, but she had refused, her reason being that this particular office made her feel at home. Her back was to him and she was flipping through a data screen with the tips of her fingers, the light that shown from it illuminating her

face. The data screen itself was powered by a machine that took up most of the room next door, and it whined angrily whenever she used it, and required constant maintenance. It only had the power of a UNSC grade data pad, but to Dr. Halsey this makeshift device was a godsend.

Moses waited for her to acknowledge his presence, but when she did not look up he spoke anyway, "John is dead." Halsey paused for a moment, and then continued to flip through the data. Moses continued, "We captured the assassin that killed him. The Agents are down stairs taking their turns on him." Dr. Halsey finally stopped and placed her hands down on the desk that the data screen was propped on. "He was like a father to most of them. The only father that some of them ever had."

Halsey was quiet for a while before she finally spoke, "He was so much like John 117, and in other ways he was so unlike him." She turned to face Moses, "I had hoped that maybe he would share the Master Chief's luck."

"He was like both of them, from what I can gather. But he was also his own person, and a good one at that," Moses said. He turned to leave the room, "I'll leave you alone to work. I know that is what you prefer."

Moses had almost walked out of the room when Halsey said, "I'll have the project finished on schedule, just like John wanted." She folded her arms, "Even if I die from a lack of sleep while trying."

Moses turned around, his hand absentmindedly going to his pocket. He reached in and fingered the quarter, the sigil from another world, which John Cullum had given to him shortly before his death. "I told you that seeing the Rose would change things."

"It did," Halsey admitted. "You were right. All three of you were right, about everything." She swallowed, "The first round of augmentations can begin in a year, and the first suits will be ready three years after that. I can't promise that more than forty percent of those that undergo the augmentations will survive but—" She paused and her eyes glanced at the data screen, "If things are really as bad as they appear to be, we don't have a choice."

"Which is why we are using adult volunteers, not children," Moses said sternly. "I've gotten more reports back from New Mexico. We know what you did to them."

"We would not have time to train candidate from that early age like the Spartan II's were anyway," Halsey said. She added bitterly, "I had thought it was necessary at the time. When the Covenant came and the human race faced extinction I thought my actions were further justified."

"Does it make it any less wrong?"

"No," Halsey said. "But you were not in my position at the time." Moses shook his head and turned to leave again but Halsey stopped him, "Do you think they will come back? John, Cortana, and the rest of the ka-tet?"

Moses smiled at her, and Halsey was surprised to see that it also

reached his eyes, "I know they will. I just hope I'm still alive to see it." He reached up with his right hand and scratched underneath his chin, "Do you know about the poem 'The Second Coming' by William Butler Yeats?"

Halsey blinked, and in the back of her mind she faintly remembered a dream she had, "Yes. Things fall apart. The center does not hold."

Moses nodded, "I think he was talking about The Dark Tower, even if he did not realize it. Yeats believed that everything came in two-thousand year cycles. Being a religious man Yeats thought that the last cycle was the birth of Christ, and the one before thatâ€|"

"The Flood and the Ark," Halsey finished for him. "I've never been much for religion."

"I was once," Moses said. "After everything I have seen though it is hard to be. If there is a god, and I believe there is, he is not the one I use to pray to." He let his hand drop from his chin, "But I do think Yeats was right. Everything is a cycle, and I think we are coming to the end of another one."

"Yeats also said that the end of this cycle would be the second coming," she said skeptically. "Do you believe that as well?"

Moses nodded, "Yes I do."

"A second coming of what exactly?"

"Arthur Eld," he said simply.

Halsey breathed out heavily and looked at the floor, "And you think John and Roland are that second coming?"

"They either are, or are the arbiters of it. Everything we have seen both in New Mexico and through the doorways points to them."

Halsey gave him a small smile as she brought her head up, "It almost sounds good enough for me to believe it."

Moses smiled back and once again attempted to leave. This time Halsey did not stop him, but as he went through the door he turned his head and said, "By the way we are going to be moving eventually. Putting our new building right on top of the vacant lot, keep the Rose safe for good."

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****LOS ANGELES TIMES****

AUTHOR STEPHEN KING HIT BY VAN, SERIOUSLY HURT

June 20th 1999

LEWISTON, Maine â€" Horror author Stephen King was seriously injured when he was struck by a van while walking near his home Saturday, police said.

King was walking south on the shoulder of Route 5 in North Lovell, where he owns a home, about 4:30 p.m. EDT when a motorist approaching from behind swerved because a dog that was loose inside his Dodge Caravan, Oxford County Sheriff's Deputy Matt Baker said.

Officials at Central Maine Medical Center said that King, 51, was in serious but stable condition. King suffered "significant" injuries, including broken bones, but was conscious and alert, hospital spokesman Laird Covey said.

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4:15 P.M., November 19th 2001 (Gregorian Calendar) Dark Tower Building, Tet Corporation Headquarters, New York, New York

Agent Nineteen as she had once been called made the long trip through the Dark Tower Building, the outside of which like its namesake was completely black (unlike its namesake it was black glass, not stone). It took several elevators, some of which were hidden, and more than one that required both voice and eye recognition, followed by a series of winding hallways to reach Dr. Halsey's subterranean office, and much like Moses Carver had before her she wondered why the Doctor preferred a room with no windows. She wore a red women's business suit, the days of her youth when she would go through the doorways to conduct raids and sabotage missions against Sombra and North Central Positronics long behind her. Her brown hair was worn tightly into a bun, her eyes a brilliant and beautiful green, and her hips swayed naturally as she walked. The door opened smoothly and automatically as she approached it, another innovation that had come over the years and had been sped along for the Tet Corporation by Halsey herself. Sitting at her desk with a now fully functioning data pad sitting in front of her, it was much bulkier than the ones in the UNSC, about the thickness of a three subject notebook; Halsey looked up at Agent Nineteen.

"How is Moses?" she asked.

"He died," Nineteen said heavily. Her lips twitched, "Peacefully in his sleep. Just old age."

"Good, he deserved that," Halsey said. She slid the data pad away, something she found easier to do now.

"I'll be running the company now, me and Delta." Nineteen smiled, a genuine smile that highlighted her naturally soft features, "Although between you and me I think Delta is far more qualified for the job. He has been basically running things since Moses got sick. I've only been the face of the company."

"You have been doing a good job at it," Halsey said dryly, but Nineteen took it for the joke that it was.

Nineteen reached into her pocket and pulled out the quarter and showed it to Halsey, "Moses gave this to me right before he died, but he was too weak to explain to me what it was. I was hoping you knew."

Halsey looked at the coin, seeing it for the first time since John Cullum had shown it to her. She nodded, "That is the quarter I gave the Master Chief when we first met."

Flipping it through her fingers, the nails painted a soft blood red, she looked at the quarter. It felt warm in her hand and gently she put it back in her pocket. "Do you think we have done well? Everything we could I mean. Everything that the Master Chief, Roland, and Eddie wanted us to do."

"You would know that better than me Nancy," Halsey said. "You were here before me."

"But you knew John 117. I was hoping," she paused and looked Halsey in the eye, "You have never told any of us what he was really like."

"You read Nylund's book. I tried to but the migraines became too severe."

"There is a difference between reading about him and actually knowing him. We have read about Roland, Eddie, Susannah, Callahan, Jake, Cortana, and the Chief, but it's just not the same. You are the only one here that actually knew two of the members of the ka-tet." Nancy shook her head, "I know that they are real, but sometimesâ€¦" she let the sentence hang.

Halsey thought for a moment, "Moses told me once that he believed they would come back. I think all three of them believed it and that's what kept them going. When he told me what he thought for a moment I almost believed it too." She got up out of the seat, she was much older now and her bones creaked as she stood, "I'm still not sure if I believe it, but you need to."

Nancy nodded and said, "Thank you." Her tone became formal in an instant, the product of her training and years spent in the business world, "When will the new candidates for the procedure be ready?"

"A month," Halsey said. "I project a ninety-five percent success rate this time. I have also added a few upgrades to the armor. Power is still a problem, but I'm hoping that with these improvements the Agents will be able to wear them twice as long."

"Another two hours would be good," Nancy said.

"Better than when we first started," Halsey said.

"Yes, and just in time too," Nancy said and Halsey raised an eyebrow. "We found him, finally, the writer of this story, and several versions of him in fact. We still don't know how many of them will actually write it, but the King's men know who he is which means things will heat up again fairly soon."

"Do you think they will try to kill him using direct or indirect means?" Halsey asked.

"We are thinking indirect just like Stephen King, although we cannot say for sure."

Halsey sighed, "I better get back to work then." She expected Nancy to leave, her having long ago developed a knack for reading exactly when Halsey wanted to be alone, but instead she stayed.

Nancy looked hesitant, worry lines forming on her face, and she reached into the leather purse slung over her shoulder. "We have not been completely honest with you," she said and Halsey, who was now sitting down again, looked up at her. Nancy pulled out a small thin box from her purse and placed it on Halsey's desk, "We thought it was best to keep this from you, even instructed Delta set up firewalls to prevent you from finding out through the internet. I think now the time is right though." Nancy's hand left the small thin box and she stepped back ready for any type of reaction, including a fit of insanity which the confidential psychiatrists they had on staff told her was a possibility.

Halsey looked at the cover of the box, studying it, and her eyes grew wide. She did the first thing we all do when faced with such a ridiculous possibility. Halsey laughed, placing her head in her hands as she leaned her elbows on the desk, and Nancy's worry lines grew deeper. "Of course it would be that," Halsey said, she laughed again and looked up at Nancy. "And to tell you the truth this is the first thing that has made sense in a long time."

48. Chapter 48

Chapter 48: Reunion

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

He saw her, Cortana's electric blue eyes were staring into his, and for a moment he forgot about the others around him, about Jake standing next to her with his shirt covered in blood, and about the screams of Flaherty coming through the doorway behind him. The world was mute, for a moment the world had not moved on, and it was while looking at her that he failed to notice the body slumped on the floor behind her.

"Suze?" Eddie's voice flung the world with the violence of a Beamquake back into focus and at last he noticed Susannah, her right arm black and rotting, her head lolling to one side lifelessly, the pained cries of a man slowly bleeding to death overlapping the scene like a dreadful soundtrack. Roland shut the door behind them and Flaherty's yelling was muffled before turning to whimpers so soft that they could be easily ignored by those used to doing so. Eddie moved towards Susannah, got on one knee, and took the back of her head in his hand, shaking it slightly. "Suze," his mouth made a smile that did not reach his eyes, "Wake up." Her head rolled forward lifelessly and Eddie wrapped his arms around Susannah's body. He brought her head into his neck and closed his eyes tightly. He felt a large hand on his shoulder and looked up to see John. "What did the White say to you huh? That you would see her again?" John didn't answer and Eddie kept talking, looking at Susannah's face which he propped up with his hand, "Well I can't say the prick didn't keep his promise."

"Eddie, I'm sorry," Cortana said quietly. She struggled with the guilt rising like the Atlantic tide inside her, before giving up and letting it overwhelm her. Putting her head down, she closed her eyes, waiting and hoping for John to come and hold her. He never did.

"Shovels," Eddie said, his voice shaking. It firmed up once he said

it again, "We need shovels if we are going to bury her." A soft white glow filled the hallway and the Master Chief's attention was drawn to the miniature Spartan figure of Church.

"There are a few of them lying around here. I can show you where they are if you want," Church said, and his shoulders slightly sagged.

Eddie barely registered the AI's presence, slowly running his fingers through Susannah's hair. "We can bury her, get some flowers too. Maybe even roses like the one in the vacant lot." He turned to Jake, "You think she would like that?"

"Yeah," Jake said. He swallowed, "She would love that."

"Eddie," Roland said. "No flowers like that grow here, only weeds and devil grass. Would you really bury Susannah here?"

Eddie turned his head around and snapped at Roland, "And what would you have me do? You're the dinh right? Tell me what to do with her."

Roland spoke calmly, "A pyre."

There was an audible crackling sound as Eddie closed his fists tight enough to where the joints in his knuckles popped, "I am not burning her."

"I can think of nothing more fitting for Susannah," Roland said. "You can find a container for her ashes. Spread them out wherever you want."

Eddie's fists loosened and he turned back to look at Susannah, his fingers resuming their trail through her hair, "Anywhere?"

"Aye, even the vacant lot if we ever see it again."

Eddie closed his eyes, "Okay, you've convinced me." He opened them and picked Susannah up in his arms, "Will you help me build the pyre Roland?" The gunslinger nodded and followed Eddie as he walked down the hallway, their footsteps echoing as they entered the darkness. Jake looked up at Cortana and it seemed like the boy was about to ask if he could go, but she cut him off before you could.

"Why don't you go help Eddie and Roland," she looked at John, "We need some time alone."

Jake looked between John and Cortana, "Okay. Just be careful." As he walked away he muttered, "I don't want to lose anybody else."

They looked at each other as he left, electric and light blue meeting like lightning meets a clear sky, and John felt his arms twitch at his side. Cortana moved towards him, and then winced in pain as she stumbled forward. His arm appeared underneath her and he held her up. "You're hurt," he said. His face was emotionless, although his eyes were shimmering under a thick wall that dammed up his feelings.

"I'm fine," Cortana said, and then betrayed her lie by wincing again, her ribs and shoulder silently throbbing.

John turned to Church's avatar that was still standing there, "Is there a medical bay here?"

"Yeah, I'll light up the way for you." There was a flicker as the florescent lights overhead turned on. They shined in a straight line down the hallway until they reached the first right corner, the lights beyond the corner turning on as well.

"Can you walk?" John asked.

"Yeah, it's just my upper body that hurts," Cortana said. He offered her his arm and she leaned against it, putting her head into his shoulder as they let Church lead the way to the medical bay.

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The medical bay itself had the feel of a military hospital. There was a large room filled with over a hundred beds outside of where the small doctor's office sat. Clean white sheets and similar equipment to the ones that had been used on Mia and Susannah when Mordred had been born told Cortana that this must have been the place where the children of the Calla had been ultimately taken to have whatever horrible procedure done to them. There were windows to the outside, and she was able to see ruined buildings; some of them brick and some of them steel and concrete, littered the landscape and skyline. The sky itself was a harsh gray and made the desolate land look as if was forever in a state of twilight. This was where the Old People's pollution and wars had reached their zenith, the poisonous gas and nuclear fallout forever blocking out the sun, moon, and stars. Just outside the window Cortana could barely make out a sign similar to the one her and Jake had found just before they reached The Dogan. On it were the words,

NO TRESPASSING

PROPERTY UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT

Cold metal seeped through her now well worn jeans as she sat on the examination table, watching John rummaging through the cabinets, frowning as he looked at the medical supplies that lay inside. He pulled out a roll of bandages, and then a pair of scissors, setting them both of them down on the counter in front of him. He turned to her, "Take off your shirt."

Cortana's heart jumped slightly at his words. Even though they had shared the same bed together for nearly a month in the Calla he had never actually seen her naked, John having always woken up before her and being gone from the room long before she got dressed. She blushed, "I don't have a bra on."

John shrugged looking indifferent, and Cortana could not help but feel a twang of regret at the look he gave her. It was completely devoid of any sexual thoughts. She began to lift up her shirt, but stopped just as the bottom of it reached her chest. A camera mounted along the far wall had moved slightly, and Cortana had caught it out of the corner of her eye. She pulled the shirt back down and crossed her arms, glaring at the camera. "Church?"

There was a long pause and then, "I wasn't looking at you through the

camera." At the sound of the AI's voice John looked at the camera as well, his muscles tightening.

"Turn it off," Cortana said sternly.

"Ugh, fine." There was a click and then, "There are you happy?" John, who was still looking at the camera, walked over. He reached up and crushed it with his hand. Church's voice ran through a speaker on the opposite side of the room, "Come on man that stuff is expensive." He began to mumble, "Fucking cockbite. First peepshow I get in a thousand yearsâ€¦" There was another crunch and John destroyed the speaker. He let it fall from his hand and it clanked on the floor. He scanned the room a few times, looking for more cameras, and then nodded to Cortana. She took a deep breath and removed her shirt, setting it on the table beside her, and then sighed again when she saw that John's eyes never wavered from hers.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked.

"My right shoulder and my chest," Cortana said.

"Upper or lower chest?" he asked, grabbing the roll of bandages and walking up to her.

"Upper," Cortana began, then mumbled, "Lower."

John cocked his eyebrow at her, moved his hands to her right shoulder, and she bit her lip as he touched it. She was very well aware the effect that the cold air in the room was having on the exposed part of her body, and was again disappointed when John did not divert his eyes. "You pulled it out from its socket," He said.

Cortana nodded, "They tied me to a chair and that's how I escaped."

John's jaw became rigid, but he made no comment on it. Instead he said, "Raise your arm." Cortana did, wincing as the joint moved, but was able to lift the arm over her head. John nodded, "Good. I don't think there is permanent damage. Swelling and bruising though, so no using it for a while."

Cortana cocked her eyebrow, "Doctor's orders?" John nodded, "And since when have you ever followed what the doctor told you to do?"

The Master Chief grunted and moved his hands to her lower chest, and Cortana felt a jolt as his fingers touched her bare skin. His head was inches from her breasts as he examined the dark bruises from where Mordred had hit her with his front legs, and she mentally yelled at him to look up. "Nothing's broken, but a few of ribs are bruised." He grabbed the roll of bandages and began rapping them around her, and Cortana felt yet another twang of disappointment. The wrapping was tight across her lower chest, but not uncomfortably so, and when John finished he turned his back to her and removed her shirt causing Cortana's heart to jump again into her throat. He handed her the pair of scissors from the counter, "I need you to remove the stitches."

"Oh," Cortana said, letting the word out in a sigh. She pulled her

shirt back on and took the scissors from him, working on the stitches that ran across his back first. As she undid them she noticed the gun belt and the hard caliber lying in the holster for the first time, "So when did you decide to become a gunslinger?" she asked.

"I'm not a gunslinger," John said, and Cortana thought he did a lousy job faking irritability.

She chuckled lightly, "I don't know. You sure do a good job looking the part." John grunted, but the corners of his mouth twitched at her joke. As she moved around in front of him she noticed the now right side in black smiley faced t-shirt lying on the floor. "I like the new shirt too. I've always said that you need to smile more."

"I don't need to smile," John said, but gave her a small one. She removed the last stitched, running her fingers across the scar underneath. It was smooth, the muscles underneath it hard as rock. She fought back a shudder and looked at the rest of his bare chest. It was also covered in scars, and Cortana moved her hand to touch a large purple one just underneath his right shoulder where a plasma bolt had burned through his armor. His arms wrapped around her and she allowed herself to be pulled in, laying her head down just above his heart, putting her own arms around her waist.

"I missed you," she said quietly and John held her tighter. Cortana rubbed her head up against his skin and closed her eyes. "I forgot how warm you feel," she said. "You know I still remember your average body temperature? 37.27 degrees Celsius." As she felt his chest rumble underneath her, the closest he usually came to laughing, Cortana realized that the numbers added up to nineteen. "I killed him," the words came out almost as a whisper. She looked up at him, and his light blue eyes filled hers, "I killed the dark man." She shook her head, "He said he killed you. I didn't believe it, didn't want to believe it. Butâ€¦"

"He tried to kill me," John said. "But somebody stopped him."

"Who?"

"The Crimson King,"

Cortana blinked, "Why?"

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head.

She reached up and put a hand against his cheek, "I love you."

"I know," John said. He fought to say it back but could not. He settled instead for letting the corners of his mouth twitch upwards. Placing her hand on the back of his head she pressed down, and John allowed his lips to be guided into hers. The kiss was brief but as he pulled his head back she increased the pressure and brought him into another. Cortana moved her lips to his neck, and her other hand began to rub along his back. She felt something between them, a hardness she had never felt from him before and John seemed equally surprised at it. The gun belt slid off, the blue steeled revolver falling hard on the tiled ground, and her hands moved quickly to the button of his jeans, but John reached out his own hand and grabbed her wrist. "Are you sure?" he asked. His face was filled with a level of uncertainty

Cortana had never seen before, even greater then when they had first spent the night together in the Jaffords' guest bedroom.

Her shirt fell to the floor in response and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him in with an amount of strength that surprised him. Underneath her skin John could see a faint blood red glow. Cortana removed her lips from his and moved them to his ear, "Please, I need this."

John shook his head, "I don't know what to do."

Cortana smiled, "It's supposed to be natural, and I hear Spartans are fast learners."

He swallowed, "Where?" Both their eyes drifted to a small bed tucked away in the corner of the doctor's office. "I don't think it will hold my weight."

Cortana was breathing heavily now, "At this point I don't care if it does." She went to reach for his hand to lead him to the bed, when suddenly he picked her up off the ground. She wrapped her arms around his neck again and kissed him all the way to the mattress.

49. Chapter 49

Chapter 49: The Son of Arthur Eld

Blood red lines of code flickered over her body. They raced faster and Cortana put her fist into her mouth to keep from screaming out. Her body shuddered and as John's grip around her waist tightened she felt a burst of warmth inside her. Biting her fist harder she felt another wave of sensations hit her and the blood red lines of code began to glow. When the wave subsided, it could have been seconds or hours as far as Cortana was concerned, she let herself fall down on top of him breathing heavily. John's breath was normal and she felt the heat of it wash over her head as nuzzled her head into his neck.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Cortana said. She took in another deep breath, "That was supposed to happen. I think." The bed had actually managed to hold both their weight small as it was; John's feet were currently dangling off the end, although by the way the mattress sagged it looked as if could collapse at any moment. At this point though neither of them could bother to care. She reached up and took the dog tags that were hanging from his neck, running her thumb over the three numbers engraved on its metal surface. "Do you know what's funny?" she asked.

"What?"

"I had always wanted to touch you. I think I wanted to do that so badly because it was the one sensation that I could visualize myself doing, but now that I have a body I don't think it's my favorite sense anymore."

"Even after this?" he asked.

She smiled, still running her thumb over the dog tags, "I mean besides sex." He shifted underneath her and she looked up at him. "Don't be such a prude. I'm just calling this what it is."

"I'm not a prude," he said and she raised her eyebrow at him. He responded by looking at her naked body on top of him, and then down at his own.

Cortana sighed and put her head back down on his chest, "You have a point there, although it did take you forever to get the hint."

"So what is your favorite sense?" he asked, moving the conversation along.

"Smell," she said, breathing in deeply through her nose. "Your smell. I can't really describe it, but you smell different to me than anything else." She looked back up at him, "Any idea what I'm talking about?"

"A little," he said. They laid there for several minutes, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. Cortana's bandages around her chest rubbed irritably against his skin, but he did nothing to voice his discomfort. She was drifting off to sleep when he spoke again, "I am the last one." Cortana's eyes opened and she propped herself up into a half sitting position on top of him. He continued, "This time I am really the last Spartan. When he tried to kill me the man in black said that Fred, Linda, Kelly, Naomi," he closed his eyes, "He said that all of them were dead."

Cortana put a hand against his cheek, "He was lying. Just like he was lying about you."

John shook his head, "No." He told her about how they had found Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck, forgetting to add the part about how he looked a little like Eddie, who was slowly dying of a virus that was destroying the UNSC.

When he was finished she looked down at his chest and her hand gravitated to his dog tags again. "If that is true then what happens if we go back and there is nothing left?"

"We will have each other," John said. His voice was confident but Cortana could sense the smallest hint of worry underneath it.

She shook her head, "Even if we can go back, even if we win, even if the UNSC is still standing," she paused and closed her eyes, "I don't think I want to go back, and not just for the reasons we talked about earlier."

She expected him to stand up as he had when she first mentioned this feeling to him, but he remained lying on the bed. "Why?" he asked.

"I've been dreaming of it, The Dark Tower. Almost every night I have dreamed of seeing it with my own eyes." She opened her eyes and looked into his, "I need to see it. I can't explain why but I need to, and I can't go back with you until I do."

"I understand," he said, his answer surprising her. "I saw it too. It'sâ€¦" He paused, not knowing the words to describe it.

"Like the Rose," she finished for him. "Only it's more than the Rose, more than everything. Because everything that was, is, and will be is at The Dark Tower. I'm not sure how I know but I can feel it." Cortana bit her lip, "But I also know that even if we try we won't reach it."

"How do you know?" he asked. She took his hand in hers and put it against her cheek.

"Because I know how the story is supposed to end." She dropped her hand and John's stayed there against her face. "After I killed Walter something happened to me. I still don't know what it is yet but I understand more about everything now." Cortana shook her head, "Not nearly everything, and not nearly enough, but I understand more than I did. Roland reaches The Dark Tower alone. He always reaches The Dark Tower alone, and I don't think it matters who tells the story that is always how it is suppose to end up." Her electric blue eyes began to grow red, not the Crimson Red of rampancy or the blood red of what Cortana was becoming increasingly sure was her own metastability, but the redness of grief. "I don't know what happens to us between now and then. Callahan and Susannah are already dead, Jakeâ€|" She went back down to him and wrapped her arms around his neck, "I love Jake. I don't know what I would do if something happened to him. If something happened to you."

He rubbed his hand down her back, "But you can't go back."

Cortana shook her head, "No. I need to see it. More than anything I need to see it." She wiped the tears from her eyes, "Walter was right. I am a fool. I know what could happen to us if we try to go to The Dark Tower, but I want to anyway. It's like some force is pushing me towards it, always pulling on me." Curling her fists into tight balls, her anger overcoming the wave of sadness she had felt Cortana said, "It's the writers fault. He is the one making me want to go even if I don't want to. It is all him."

"Then we will go see him," John said. She looked up at him, "All of us will go see him. If anyone has the answers he does." He brushed the hair out of her eyes, "Do you know who he is?"

"No," Cortana said. "But I know when he is. December 19th 2012." She bit her lip, "But I don't know where, or even what he looks like." She sighed, "And what if he does not have the answers. What if it's something else that is causing me to want to go."

"It's him," John said firmly. "It has to be him."

â€|

Walter laid there in two pieces, the smell of burning flesh invading the gunslingers nose. He had to see the dark man's body, was itching to go even as all five of them watched Susannah burn on the pyre. At one moment the flames had framed her body like a portrait, and he felt guilt when he saw that Eddie had not cried. In Roland's opinion he had trained him far too well, and now the last vestiges of the personality he had before the gunslinger had drawn him into mid-world, his constant and often irritating jokes, might very well be gone. Jake had not cried either, although by the way the boy clung to Cortana's arm he suspected that Jake had around her. Eddie had

quietly put what ashes he could gather into a small tin container, and then went off to be alone. The Master Chief had followed him. This did not necessarily surprise Roland, although he did find it curious. The Spartan had never seemed to like Eddie that much, and Roland could not blame him. As the gunslinger had said before, his first reaction upon meeting Eddie Dean was to kill him, and now he was glad he did not listen to his instincts. He was a good friend, one of the few Roland had left, and one of the very few he had ever had. As he looked at Walter O'Dim's body, Martin Broadcloak as he had known him in Gilead, he felt something unexpected. Deep inside in the part of his subconscious that he did not normally allow himself to recognize, this was where he held his feelings towards Cortana for example; he felt a twinge of sadness. Walter had been one of the only two living remnants of his destroyed civilization. Now with the dark man's passing Roland was the only one left that remember Gilead as it once was, and after ten centuries he was finally growing old.

_Farewell Walter that was, _Roland thought. _You were not my greatest enemy, but you were my oldest._ He heard Jake walking down the hallway towards him, knowing it was the boy by the lightness of the steps. The gunslinger also felt the presence of another, watching him from one of the entrances to the room, but he did not acknowledge her. Having an idea of what Jake was about to do, Roland thought it was best to keep of the charade of privacy. He met Jake's sky blue eyes as he walked into the room, stepping nimbly over the bodies of the fallen low men without looking down.

Jake brought a closed fist up to his head, "Hile father."

The gunslinger returned the salute, "Hile Jake."

Jake got on one knee in front of him and looked at Roland's feet, "Cry pardon gunslinger. Susannah's death was my fault. I should have left Callahan as soon as he told me to." Jake closed his eyes, "I have forgotten your face."

"Stand up," Roland said firmly. Jake did, but his eyes were still looking at the floor. "Look at me." The boy did and Roland put a hand on his shoulder. He spoke slowly, "Never cry my pardon again." He moved his hand to the back of Jake's head, "You have done enough."

Jake's eyes looked down again and his chest expanded as he took in a long breath, "Aye father."

Roland nodded his head towards the entrance, the one opposite to where Cortana was standing. "Go comfort Eddie. You are better at that than I am." Jake looked back up at him and Roland added, "and better than the Spartan is." Jake nodded and walked away. Cortana waited for the boy to leave before she walked into the room, the gunslinger's eyes already meeting hers. She spoke, and the language she spoke in made Roland's eyes widen the barest bit.

"Had heet Rol-uh, fa heet gun, fa heet hak, fa-had gun?"

Roland looked her over slowly, and then nodded, "Aye." The rest of the conversation that followed was entirely in the High Speech. "How can thou speak the High Speech, and where did thou hear it?"

"I can speak hundreds of languages," Cortana said. Her arms were crossed, "Although next to the Covenant and Forerunner dialect thine language was the hardest to learn." She nodded over at the man in black's severed body, "Something happened after I killed him. When it did the knowledge of thine language washed over me like a flood. As to where I heard that phrase I knowest not." She looked up at him, "But what I do know is that thou art Roland Deschain son of Steven, grandson of Alaric, cousin to John 117, and the father of Mordred." She spoke the last part with certain coldness only reserved for ones enemies, and it grew colder when the gunslinger did not protest the assertion. "Thee knew, did thee not?"

"Aye I knew," Roland said. "Or at least I suspected strongly."

Cortana gritted her teeth, "Mia told us her story, although I am still not sure how much of it I believe." His light blue eyes never wavered from hers, and she hated him for how much Roland looked like John. "One of the things that does not make sense is why you laid with her, because thou could have escaped with Jake could thou not have?"

Roland nodded, "I went back to her after I pulled Jake away. I promised to lay with her in exchange for prophesy."

"What prophesy?" Cortana asked, attempting to keep her voice calm.

"If I would catch Walter or not," He said.

"And she told thou that thou would have to let Jake die, that thou would have to let him drop under the mountains."

"She did," he said. There was a hint of shame in his voice.

Cortana felt disgusted and diverted her eyes away from his, "Jake came to thee asking forgiveness when thou are more at fault than him for Susannah's death."

Roland sighed, "I told John that he should be dinh because he is better than me, but I do not think he fully understood what I meant."

"And how is he better than thou?" Cortana asked, still unable to look at him.

"Because even now I would still sacrifice all of thou to reach The Dark Tower," he said, and hint of shame danced over his features. "John would not."

"He wants to go because I want to go," Cortana said quietly. She forced herself to look at him, "How often does thou dream about it?"

"Always," the gunslinger replied. "It is pulling at me, even now."

Cortana nodded, understanding, "I will not tell Eddie or Jake about this. Not for thee, but for them. They still look up to thou."

"Thou will not have to, because I will tell them," Roland said. "John told me something, and I believe he was right."

Cortana nodded, "He usually is." She gave a slight smile, "I have rubbed off on him." She unfolded her arms, "We are going to see the writer, find out what he knows, but first," she looked up at the sky where the beam was passing overhead, "We need to find a way to stop The Dark Tower from falling."

Roland shook his head, "Delay it." Cortana returned her gaze to him. "If I knew a way to stop it I would tell thee."

Cortana sighed, "Then we will find a way to stop it." She bit the inside of her cheek. There was one more thing that had come to her after defeating the dark man, and she had not fully believed it. If anyone knew whether or not it was true though, it would be Roland. "There is another of the Line of Eld." It was a statement not a question. "Not just Mordred either. There is somebody else who is related to thee and John out there."

Roland nodded, "Aye. He revealed himself to me shortly after Susan Delgado's death."

She closed her eyes, waiting for the answer she already knew, "Who?"

"Mine and John's cousin. The Crimson King, son of Arthur Eld."

50. Chapter 50

Chapter 50: Delay Tactics

Eddie gripped the small tin container which held Susannah's ashes tighter as Roland told him about who Mordred's father was, and about how he had been conceived. He did not look at the gunslinger when he asked, "How long did you know?"

"From the beginning," Roland said. They sat in a circle, a small holographic projector containing Church's avatar in the middle. Jake sat between John and Cortana, and the boy currently had his knees up to his chest and was looking at the ground between his feet. There was a spot open to Eddie right where Susannah would have sat, and John sat to the left of Roland.

"So what is stopping me from killing you right now?" Eddie asked, although his hand did not move towards the UNSC pistol that was tucked into the band of his jeans.

"You have already tried to kill me twice before," Roland responded.

Cortana raised an eyebrow at this and looked between the two men. _Guess there is some history between them they haven't told us about._

"You have always been faster than me," Eddie said, his eyes were still on the tin container.

"You are a gunslinger, and a good one," Roland said. "And I believe

that you have told me it is a saying in New York that the third time is the charm." The gunslinger looked at the pistol in Eddie's jeans, "But if you had wanted to kill me then you would have drawn your gun already."

Eddie was quiet for a long time before he raised his head and looked Roland in the eye, "I'm with you Roland, but only because Susannah wanted to see The Dark Tower too." He looked back at the container, "She wanted to see it just as much as I do. I owe it to her to try and reach it, and I can't do that without you."

Roland sighed, "If you no longer wish for me to be dinhâ€|"

Eddie cut him off with a forced laugh, "You are always dinh. It doesn't matter what anyone else here thinks, you are always dinh." He pointed at John, "The big guy said it himself. What was it? Chain ofâ€|"

"Chain of command," John finished. "Roland is older than me."

Eddie shook his head, "I should have known you two were related. Hell my nicknames for you two were already the same and you both have that same stupid sense of honor." His voice began to rise as he continued speaking, "Because it doesn't matter that Gilead was destroyed a thousand years ago, or that the UNSC is likely gone too. Both of you will still follow their laws and codes no matter what. You don't have a choice, you're trapped by it." Neither John or Roland responded and Eddie shook his head again, "And I'm just as guilty as the both of you, because I'm still going to follow you even if it gets me killed, even if it got Susannah killed." He looked at Roland, "Well if you are going to lead me then lead me. Tell me what to do."

Roland sighed, Cortana noticing the same hint of shame she saw earlier, and the gunslinger turned to Church, "What can you tell us about the breakers?"

"They're the ones big red has gotten to destroy the beams holding up The Dark Tower."

"They are like me aren't they?" Jake asked raising his head, and Church's avatar turned to look at him. "They have the touch like me. Psychics."

"Yeah I guess that's what you can call them. Anyway they have a few hundred of them penned up in Algul Sientoâ€|"

"Blue Heaven," Cortana said, and John turned to look at her. "That's what Algul Siento means in the High Speech." She turned to Church, "Why do they call it that?"

"I don't fucking know," Church said. "I wasn't on the naming committee."

"Are they prisoners?" John asked. His voice was level but Cortana could sense the irritation behind it.

"Pretty much, at least so far as they kill anyone who tries to leave. Other than that I've heard it's actually not that bad. Guess they figured having comfortable surroundings helps get the psychic juices flowing." He motioned with his head over at Jake, "One of you guys

wouldn't be able to do anything to harm the beam, but a few hundred of you all at once and given enough time, snap the beam right in fucking half."

"We already experienced a Beamquake," Eddie said, his voice still devoid of its usual humor, and Cortana wondered whether or not it would ever come back. "Not pleasant."

"Yeah I measured it on the Richter scale when it happened. Got some video of the low-men and taheen's reactions to it if you want to watch."

"Maybe later," Cortana said. "You seem to have a habit of video tapping people."

Church cocked his head, "Well hey can you blame me? Just be thankful Tucker wasn't here, otherwise you and the Chief would have neverâ€¦"

"Where is Algul Siento?" John asked, the irritation he felt almost seeping into his voice. Beside him Jake had returned to looking at the ground between his feet and Cortana quickly attempted to push all the thoughts about what her and John had done in the doctor's office as far down into the back of her mind as she could.

"You guys said you came from the Calla right? Where the Wolves took the kids from?" Church asked and John nodded, "Well you would have to backtrack towards the Calla in order to get to it. Take you a few weeks to get there on foot."

"It would take longer," Roland said. "The more the beam weakens and the closer we get to The Dark Tower the more things like time, distance, direction can no longer be relied upon." He motioned his head towards the window where the gray landscape was still lit up like the last hours of twilight, or the first few hours of an early dawn. It could have been either as far as the ka-tet could tell. "How long would you say we have been here?" the gunslinger asked.

"At least twelve hours," John replied, and Roland nodded.

"Aye, and yet it has not grown dark, only remained what passes for day in this place. Tomorrow may be six hours long, and the day after could be twenty. North may become east, and the distance of a hundred wheels may turn to three hundred." He looked at Church, "And time, as intangible as it is, is not something we have a lot of. Is there another way to Algul Siento?"

Church seemed to pause for a moment, and Cortana wondered if he was really taking that long to think or if it was just for show. He was an old AI, over two thousand years by her calculations which in mid-worlds time flow would mean he was created by the Old People. Only Forerunner grade smart AIs had ever been known to last more than seven years before they began to deteriorate. Either Project Freelancer had discovered the secret to metastability, or Church had somehow reached that state on his own. At last he said, "There is another doorway that leads to a spot a few kilometers outside the prison, but it's a littleâ€¦bumpy."

"How bumpy?" Cortana asked.

"You'll see once you go through."

Eddie looked up from the tin container and stared at John and Cortana, "And after we are done butchering all the guards at Algul Siento and free the breakers, you two want to go see the writer." John nodded and Eddie looked at Roland, "And you agree with this?"

"We will need to check on the Rose and the Tet Corporation anyway," the gunslinger looked at John, "And only after that will we go see the writer."

"Agreed," the Master Chief said. "The Rose is more important."

"Aye," Roland said. "It is likely that the Rose is what is holding up the second beam, one of the last two that I believe are still standing."

"He is responsible for Susannah, and Callahan's death isn't he?" Eddie asked, looking at Roland. "More so than you."

Roland nodded, "It is possible, but we cannot jump to that conclusion. Ka-tet means one out of many. If he is part of our ka-tet, if only indirectly, then killing him could be disastrous."

"And if he is not," Eddie said, clutching the tin container tighter, "then can I kill him?"

The gunslinger stared at Eddie for a long moment before nodding, "Aye."

"Good."

"What do we do after we go to the Tet Corporation and meet the writer?" Jake asked. He had skimmed Roland's mind and knew the answer, but wanted to hear it from the gunslinger himself. _Like it or not, _Jake thought. _He is still my father. The closest I've ever had to one. _He looked into Roland's light blue eyes, _But you let me fall under the mountains. Now Susannah and Callahan are dead and they won't be coming back. _He looked around at the rest of the ka-tet, _None of us will. We have used up our get out of jail free cards when it comes to death. _

"Then," Roland said. "We will go to the Court of The Crimson King, and there the Spartan and I will kill our cousin, if we can."

_And then we go to The Dark Tower, _Cortana thought, slightly frightened at the longing she felt for it. _Unless I can somehow convince the writer not to make me want to go, or unless Roland decides Eddie can kill him. _At this point either option was fine with her.

"And when do we get to kill that bastard son of yours?" Eddie asked.

"If he is anything like his father, then we could hunt him for years and never find him. We wait until he comes to us," Roland said.

"That is risky," John said. He turned to Jake next to him, "Are you able to sense him?"

Jake shook his head, "No he is blocking me out. I've never felt a mind like this before. It's like I'm sensing a brick wall and nothing else."

John nodded and turned to Church who anticipated his question, "I've been watching him for the past thirteen hours. Bad news is that he just turned a rock cat inside out and ate it. Good news is that this is only his third one today." He sighed, "He has blocked me out of most of the systems already. He'll follow you through the doorway once you go through if you don't leave me behind to delay him."

"Church," Cortana said. "I have only ever encountered one other mind that was stronger than Mordred's. I know you think you will be safe because you don't have a body butâ€|"

"I'm not planning on being safe," Church said. "Look all of my friends are dead, and all the other AIs of Project Freelancer have been deactivated except for Delta, and God knows where the hell he is. I've been stuck here for centuries with no one to talk to. I'm tired." He tilted his head and a bit of humor came back into his voice, "Beside I thought you didn't like me."

Cortana smiled, "I don't, but you helped us." She looked at the boy sitting next to her and put a hand on his shoulder, "And if it wasn't for you Jake would be dead."

_I doubt that Cortana, _John thought, remembering the nearly thirty bodies they had encountered while going under the Dixie Pig, all with single bullet holes in either their head or heart.

"Judging by how you digitally raped me when you bypassed the firewalls for Directive Nineteen, I think you would have gotten the password anyway," Church said. "Look just let me do this. I have a feeling he is going to regret absorbing me after he gets a good look at my memories."

â€|

Double iron wrought gates that the Wolves passed through as they made their periodic raids on the Calla took up most of the room. Failing machines flanked it on either side, their gears whirling angrily and giving off the foul stench of burning rubber and plastic as Cortana activated them. Computers lit up, giving off the blue screen of death, and she frowned at the logo of North Central Positronics which filled up the monitors. What had once been one of the crowning achievements of the Old People was now little more than a heap of junk that was only turned on at the user's peril.

"Will it work?" John asked, peering over her shoulder.

Cortana reconnected with the system by stretching out her hand, faint blood red lines of code swimming underneath her skin. "It should, but Church was right. It's going to be bumpy."

"How bumpy?" he asked.

"Remember back on the first Halo ring when I hacked into the teleportation system?"

John nodded, "Just make sure I don't land on my head this time."

Cortana pulled back her hand and sighed, "You are never going to let me live that one down are you?"

"No."

There was the sound of creaking gears, the rusting teeth grinding together as they bit into one another, dust and steam rolling off of them as the doors slowly opened. Through them Cortana could see what looked like the interior of a train station. There were several rows of train tracks running along an area a meter down from the main floor, all but one of them still intact. The others had their steel beams rolled up and twisted like ribbons, the wood that connected them together having long rotted away. The set of tracks that were still functional was relatively new by comparison, and she could see several meters of steel that had been recently replaced. Dozens of benches lined the main staging area, and they were covered in what seemed like several millimeters of dust, the remnants of luggage underneath. Broken glass littered the marble floor, and Cortana could see the eternally grey sky over head, and barely, just barely, she could make out the path of the beam as the clouds swirled along its path.

_At least we don't have to hold hands, _John thought. He took several long strides and stepped through. He was instantly met with the feeling of vertigo, the world itself tilting on its axis as he was overcome with the sensation of his stomach being turned inside out. There was the sense of falling and he felt the shards of glass break underneath his boots. The others entered the doorway behind him, Eddie, Jake, and Cortana immediately falling to the ground on their hands and knees, and the sound of them vomiting made the world tilt again. _Cortana was wrong. This isn't like back on the first Halo, _he thought. _This is worse. _He steadied himself, but when he saw Roland put his hand against one of the benches, the ash colored dust smearing against his palm, and vomit as well, John gave in. He leaned forward slightly and felt his stomach wrench.

Cortana grabbed her stomach as the nausea intensified; sending another wave of recently digested canned food that they had found in Fedic up through her throat. After that round was finished she wiped her mouth on her blue cotton shirt, doing her best to fight down yet another urge to throw up. That was when she heard the voice.

(Run. You have set off the alarm. They are coming)

She looked around, the nausea momentarily subsiding, and thought back, _Who are you?_

(Ted) the voice said impatiently. (But we don't have time for introductions. They will be where you are any minute)

_You are one of the breakers aren't you? _she thought. John walked up to her, wiping his mouth in the same way she had on the sleeve of his black shirt. He reached out his hand to help her up and frowned when

she did not take it.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She threw up her hand in a gesture that clearly meant he needed to stop talking. Cortana listened for the voice.

(Yes) Ted said in her mind, the impatience in his thoughts nearly palpable now. (The Weasel has sent the big gorillas to go check the alarm, so unless you want to meet themâ€¦)

Big gorillas? Cortana mentally asked. The voice sighed in her head and her mind was filled with the image of an over eight foot tall walking primate. Brown matted fur covered its body, and carnivorous fangs decorated the inside of its mouth as the creature panted. Upon receiving the image Cortana grabbed John's hand and pulled herself up, "We need to leave now."

"What is it?" Jake asked. He was still clutching his stomach as he walked towards them but he stopped midstride and his face became blank. He tilted his head slowly as if listening for something, and then his eyes began to widen. "No," he said. "They can't be here, not from your world."

"Cortana?" John asked, drawing the revolver from its holster and thumbing back the hammer. "What is coming?"

"Brutes," she answered.

51. Chapter 51

Chapter 51: The Great Journey

Cortana scanned the area around the train station, looking for any kind of control panel for the doorway to Fedic.

(It's behind you to your left) Ted's voice said inside her mind. She turned around and saw it, a touch screen control panel with the North Central Positronics logo and a crack running right down its middle. She ran to it, stretching out her hand as she did and connected with the system as she touched the screen, her mind partially leaving her body as a result and she was filled with the peculiar sensation of being in two places at once. John moved in front of her with his revolver drawn, scanning the main floor entrances.

_Too many, _he thought, counting over a dozen entrances in total including the pair of partially destroyed escalators that led up to ground level. _Too many places the Brutes can come from. _He gazed up at the giant glass dome ceiling that was missing several panes, the broken shards of which crunched uneasily beneath his feet. _This station must have been massive in its day, at least by their standards. _The others had drawn their guns as well, moving towards the Master Chief and forming a loose circle around Cortana as she worked. "Cortana, what are you trying to do?"

For her John's words were distant, but she answered him using the mouth of her corporal body while the majority of her mind tried to navigate the cramped and partially destroyed computer system that controlled the doorway. "I'm trying to make it seem as if the alarm went off because of a system malfunction, then close the doorway."

She gestured off handedly at the vomit that was on the train station's floor, "And also find a way to clean that up."

"Well you wouldn't happen to know where the janitors closet is would you?" Eddie asked dryly. Cortana responded by snapping her fingers, more for show than anything else, and a door slid open under a sign that said Maintenance Staff Only. Out of it came a three foot tall, grey, box shaped robot rolling on three wheels and brushes spinning counter clockwise underneath its chassis.

"This little guy is on his last legs, but he should do the job," Cortana said, refocusing her attention on the system. A small port opened in the center of the janitorial robot and a thin nozzle protruded out. It began to spray brown murky water on the floor where the vomit was and gave off the foul stench of sewage.

"At least we managed to cover up the puke with shit," Eddie said, still speaking in the same dry humorless voice.

"It will work," John said. "We just need to cover up our sent."

"How tough are these guys?" Jake asked, holding his ruger pistol in a readying position, muzzle pointed in the air and barrel resting comfortably against his shoulder.

"Tough," John said.

"Weak points?" Roland asked, his eyes darting between the entrances.

"Eyes and throat. Anywhere else will just make them angry," John said.

"Got it," Cortana said, removing her hand from the broken screen. The double iron doors began to swing shut behind them and John mentally winced at the squealing the gears made caused my millennia of rust and neglect. "Sorry I can't do anything about the noise," she apologized, running past John as she did and moving towards the broken escalators. "Follow me. Ted is giving directions."

"Who's Ted?" Eddie called out after her. As he did there was the sound of multiple howls in the distance, the tunnels and vast dome of the train station amplifying their echoes until they seemed to be coming from everywhere at once.

"Later," John said, running after Cortana, Jake following close behind. Eddie gazed down the multiple entrances where the echoes seemed to be coming from, his grip on the UNSC pistol tightening.

Roland put a hand on his shoulder as the gunslinger moved past him, "Let's go, we'll kill them later." Eddie gave one last look at the entrance closest to him, its arched marble frame missing several blocks that had fallen out and were currently in a pile of rubble beneath it, before running after the others.

â€|

(Turn left) Ted's voice said as Cortana reached yet another corner in the endless maze of hallways that made up the heart of the train

station, the others following close behind. They had past several skeletons along the way, security guards wearing their blue uniforms in tattered rags manning check points that had not seen travelers pass through in centuries. Several times they had past cracked glass doors covered in soot and ash that led to the outside, the dim light barely shinning in, but each time the voice of Ted had sent them in a different direction. Another series of howls echoed through the station, but they were distant now and appeared to be moving in the opposite direction. At the very least they were being led away from the Brutes. The hallway they had just entered in was short and narrow. Near the end of it hanging loosely from the ceiling by a tangled bird's nest of frayed wires was an EXIT sign, and behind that was a door with the words Emergency Exit Only.

_Is this it? _Cortana mentally asked.

(Yes) Ted said. The impatience in his voice was not as apparent now, but it was still there. (Move through the door and I will give you more directions when you are outside)

Got it, Cortana thought back. She pushed the door open with her left shoulder, her right one still too sore to make such an attempt with it. It swung open a few inches but refused to budge further. John tapped her shoulder and Cortana moved out of the way, giving her Spartan a wide birth as he brought his knee up to his chest and slammed his right foot into the door. The hinges broke off and the metal door slammed onto the ground outside, a dent in the shape of a large boot heel on its face. The ka-tet moved outside, Roland, John, Eddie, and Jake fanning out naturally into a semi circle around the entrance of the door with the unarmed Cortana behind them, their guns raised. The terrain before them was completely flat, with no cover or vegetation with the exception of a few scattered clumps of dry weeds. The air was stale and tasted like copper, and while it was far from being hot there was no wind, and that combined with the dryness of the air made Cortana feel like she was back in the desert. In the distance etched against the horizon was a cluster of rock formations.

Ted's voice reentered her mind, (Do you see the rock formation that looks like a needle?)

Cortana squinted and could just barely make out a red colored formation of rocks that seemed to stretch narrowly up into the air for several hundred meters, each boulder stacked on top of the other as if they had been placed there by giants. _Yes, _Cortana thought.

(I want you to open a portal to it from where you are) Ted's voice said. (You are strong in the touch. Stronger than even me)

Cortana paused for a moment and John looked over his should at her, a hint of worry in his eyes which betrayed his otherwise calm demeanor. _You made a mistake, _Cortana thought. _I'm not human, not fully anyway. I am aâ€¦_

(UNSC military grade smart AI CTN 0452-9, yes I know. Semantics, Cortana, semantics. Focus on the rock formation and have the boy help you. It's called Can Steek-Tete, theâ€¦|)

_The Little Needle, _Cortana finished for him.

(Good translation) Ted said, the internal voice in her mind sounding mildly impressed. (Focus on its name, and let nature take care of the rest)

Cortana sighed and turned to the boy whose eyes were darting back and forth across the landscape, "Jake, come here and take my hand. I need you to help me do something." Jake turned around to look at her, his head tilted, and Cortana felt the slight sensation of cold mercury enter her mind. Jake's pupils widened and contracted, and then he nodded, holstering his ruger pistol and walking up to her. "Do you know what I'm trying to do?" Cortana asked.

"Yes," Jake said. "Can Steak-Tete."

"Right, The Little Needle. Help me focus on it." Cortana turned towards the rock formation and closed her eyes, taking the boys hand, focusing on the narrow formation of rocks in the distance.

"Cortanaâ€|" John began to ask, before a bolt of white electricity hit the ground between him and Roland. Both the gunslinger and the Spartan took a step backward, Eddie doing the same as the blood red lines of code raced over Cortana's skin and white electricity crackled around her body. John was almost sure that Jake would be electrocuted, but the boy's face remained calm as the miniature arcs of lightning flew past his body, the static electricity making his thick blonde hair stand on end. There was one last sharp crack before Cortana was engulfed in a white aura of light, and John instantly recognized what it was, and much like the last time he saw it the Master Chief had to shield his eyes. The vacant air in front of the ka-tet ripped open and John felt the black shirt on his skin being pulled towards what looked like a slipspace portal that had appeared just feet from him. Cortana opened her eyes and the white around her disappeared, the lines of code slowing down to a crawl before they also sank beneath her skin.

She smiled at John, "Not bad for my first time." Her smile faded as she saw the look of worry in his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"You're bleeding," he said. She felt a warm trickle run down her chin and Cortana touched her nose with her hand. When she pulled it away it was covered in blood.

"I'm fine," she said, smearing the blood off her face with the back of her hand. Cortana nodded towards the portal, "Let's go through before it decides to close." She began to run towards, almost unconscious of the fact that she was still holding Jake's hand, and went through expecting the same sense of vertigo they had felt earlier when traveling from Fedic to the train station. It never came and her feet landed softly on red dirt just behind a large group of boulders, the rocks that made up The Little Needle stretching up into the sky in front of her. There was the sound of popping and the other three men appeared beside her, the portal behind them shrinking as the last one went through before disappearing. Looking around she saw that the rock formation was actually on top of a large plateau overlooking the flat terrain around them. In the distance behind them she could make out the large abandoned train station with tracks leading out of it in either direction, following the path of the beam. Before leaving the Calla Cortana would have considered the

tracks to be going east and west, but if what Roland said in Fedic was true then there was no longer east, west, north, or south. No direction of any kind, just the road towards The Dark Tower.

_Okay, _she thought to Ted. _Now what?_

(Now comes the hard part. You have to bring me and my friend to you)

â€|

The first person who stepped through the portal had the look of a man over sixty, his thin gray white hair being the first to betray his age. A younger man stepped out next to him, looking no older than twenty and probably a few years younger judging by the fresh sprout of acne across his face. The older man turned to Cortana who was standing by John, "Keep the portal open. We don't want to stay here too long incase we're missed." He looked at Roland who had taken one of the few remaining Camel cigarettes in the pack that John Cullum gave him and was in the process of tearing off the filter. The old man held a closed fist to his forehead and said, "Hile gunslinger."

Roland raised his own fist to his forehead and said, "Hile. What is your name?"

"Ted Brautigan of Connecticut 1960. That was after my first escape attempt from Algul Siento. Before that I was from the Connecticut of 1955," Ted gestured towards the young man next to him, "And this is Dinkyâ€|" He paused and his eyes fell on Jake, and Cortana saw the pupils of his eyes expand and contract much like the boy's had only minutes before. "Bobby?" he asked his voice unsure.

Jake shook his head, his eyes beginning to flicker as well, and Cortana could almost see a thin thread connecting their two sets of eyes together. "No, I'm Jake Chambers ofâ€|"

"New York 1977," Ted finished. He shook his head and the flickering in his eyes stopped. "I'm sorry. It's just that except for the hair you look remarkably similar to a boy I knew in the Connecticut of 1960, Bobbyâ€|"

"Garfield," Jake said, tilting his head. "He lived in the apartment below you. His dad died when he was five and his mother always worked."

Ted nodded his head, "Yes, he was a good kid."

Jake sighed, his eyes returning to their normal state, and he looked at the ground, "Yeah he was. He did look like me didn't he?"

Dinky coughed and said, "Ted we don't have a lot of time."

Ted shook his head again, "Sorry, It's justâ€|" His eyes began to flicker again and he stared off into the distance with a blank look on his face, "Twins. Twins across realities."

Beside him Dinky sighed, "Ted's a little hard to get use to, but he's a good guy." He looked at Cortana, "So you're the blue woman he has been talking about when he gets like this?" He motioned with his

thumb towards Ted who was still standing there as if frozen. He looked her up and down, "Well you don't look blue, except for your shirt. The way he was talking I was expecting you to have blue skin or something."

Cortana smiled, "Well I used to, but it's a long story."

"Huh," Dinky said. He turned his attention to John, "Judging by your height I'm guess you're the Spartan, although you are not as tall as I expected." He looked back at Ted, "I think he exaggerates a little when he blanks out." He moved his gaze down the line to Roland, "And you're Roland of Gilead, the dinh. The Line of Eld?"

The gunslinger took a drag off of the recently lit cigarette and motioned with his head towards John, "We both are."

Dinky put a hand up to his acne covered chin, "Hmmm. You hear that Ted? You actually missed something."

Ted's whole body seemed to shake this time in one jolt as he pulled himself back to reality, "Yes. Roland Deschain and John 117 of the Line of Eld."

"Aye," Roland said. "How many of you are there?"

"Three-hundred of us in Algul Siento, although there are only a handful with me and Dinky."

"And the others?" John asked.

Ted sighed, "If all of the Breakers banded together we could easily overpower the guards." He shook his head, "Or at least we could have. The way things stand most of them are either too comfortable or too scared."

"Comfortable in a prison, are they institutionalized?" Eddie asked.

"It's not exactly like a prison, more like a college campus crossed with a small town," Dinky said. "We all have our own rooms, fairly decent sized ones with plasma screen T.V.'s and mini fridgesâ€|"

"Plasma screen T.V.'s?" Eddie asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah you know so that you can watch DVD's and play X-Box," Dinky said. Eddie opened his mouth again but Dinky interrupted him, "Oh wait. You are from 1987 right? That stuff hasn't come out yet in your time."

"And in my opinion he is probably better for it," Ted said with a measure of distaste.

Dinky looked at Ted and shook his head, "Just because you can't get the hang of video games doesn't meanâ€|"

"I have not gotten the hang of them because I don't want to," Ted said evenly. He then paused again and looked at John whose face remained expressionless, although Cortana could sense the irritation slowly building inside of him. "I believe our new friend is growing

tired of our argument."

"Yes," John said.

Dinky looked the Spartan over again and although his eyes did not flicker in and out like Jake and Ted's had, John felt the as if the young man was staring right through him, as if he was looking at something more than just the Master Chief's outward appearance. John's hairs stood up on the back of his neck, and when Dinky's eyes left him he felt the hairs go back down. It was not a pleasant feeling. Dinky coughed again, "Moving on then. Well like I said it's really not a bad place, and that's precisely the problem. They make it so nice that you don't want to leave. Ted is the only one who I know has actually escaped, and the guy who made the portal for him ended disappearing afterwards."

"I thought they killed anyone who tried to escape," Jake said.

"More like we never hear from them again," Ted said. "Usually happens with the drug addicts they bring to Algul Siento. There may be more people than me who have escaped, but there is no way to tell."

"And the reason why you are still alive is because you are too damned important," Dinky said. "Ted is what you might call a super break. Heard the King's men nearly busted the bank trying to recapture him."

"On topic Dinky," Ted said, looking at John and then at Roland who was making a twirling gesture with the fingers holding the cigarette, the smoke trail moving out in spirals away from him.

"So what else is there that makes the place so nice?" Cortana asked, genuinely curious.

"Well," Dinky said. "The food is great, they tailor make your stay here depending on whether you are an introvert or an extrovert so as much or as little contact with others as you want, all we have to do is sit in a room for a few hours a day and think, they have alcohol and cigarettes; the good stuff too, hundreds of thousands of electronic books you can read, even have a sex simulator for us lonely types."

Cortana raised her eyebrow, "Sex simulator?"

Dinky nodded, "Yeah it uses something called hard light plus a few other technologies that I can't wrap my head around. Looks and feels like the real thing."

_Hmmm, certainly would have been useful, _Cortana thought, stealing a glance at John. She discreetly nudged him in the arm and he glanced down at her quickly before looking back up.

"Would they try and stop us?" John asked.

"The other Breakers? No they would just hide once the shooting started. Like I said they are just too comfortable and too scared."

"Of what?" Roland asked, flicking the spent cigarette into a group of rocks in front of him.

Ted answered him, "Before I would say that they were mostly just comfortable, but ever since they moved the big guerillas in along with the other aliens, I would say that now they are just scared." He motioned with his hand to the group of boulders behind them, "I'll show you."

â€|

As the ka-tet, Dinky, and Ted laid there on their stomachs on the plateau overlooking the compound, Cortana could now see why it was called Blue Heaven. The roofs of all the buildings were painted sky blue, and the suburban architecture of the compound juxtaposed with the ten meter tall electrified fenced topped with razor wire almost gave the prison the feel of a heavily guarded gated community.

Eddie pressed the pair of binoculars that Ted and Dinky had brought with them up to his eyes and adjusted them as he looked at the compound. "Those Brutes are a lot uglier in the flesh," he said. He set the binoculars down and turned his head towards John who was lying next to him, "Eyes and throat you said?"

"Yes," he said. Eddie offered the binoculars to him but John shook his head, being able to see the details clearly enough with just his eyes. "We are going to be outnumbered heavily."

"That's fine by me," Eddie said, offering Cortana the binoculars this time. She took them and brought them up to her eyes, and spent a few moments adjusting the blurry image. She scanned the blue rooftops, counted six sentry outposts manned by Jackal snipers, and spotted two taheen giving orders to a gaggle of grunts who were carrying a number of plasma power cells. Cortana continued to scan and was just about to pass the binoculars off to Jake when her eyes caught something she did not believe. She brought the binoculars down and turned to John, "Chief, are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

"Yes," John said. He had seen it too, was seeing it now, and was still not sure if it was real.

"What is it?" Roland asked.

"Something I never thought I would see in my life."

â€|

The human warden of Algul Siento, Pimli Prentiss, rubbed his right temple as he saw the massive eight and a half foot tall Jiralhanae stride towards him, the bayonet of a Brute shot strapped to his back sticking out above his head. Prentiss hated dealing with the Jiralhanae, even more so than he did the Unggoy and Kig-Yar. The Unggoy at least were easy to order around, even if their constant barking made Prentiss want to grate his teeth, and the Kig-Yar could at least be motivated to work if given the proper incentive. _But these Jiralhanae, _the human thought. _They are just tooâ€|_

The Jiralhanae got onto one knee in front of the human, his head now nearly level with Prentiss. He put a closed fist over his head and said, "Hail holy emissary of the great Red King, arbiter of the Great Journey."

_Formal, _Prentiss finished in his head. He sighed and quickly returned the salute, "What have you got for me Daedalus?"

"Yes holy emissary," Daedalus said and Prentiss rubbed his temple again.

_I thought I told him not to call me that. I'm a warden not a priest, _he thought.

Daedalus continued, bowing his head deeply before the human, "It was only a false alarm. We believe that it was caused by a maintenance drone that had the impertinence of spewing feces in front of the doorway. I had my pack rip it limb from limb for its sins."

Prentiss put a hand up to his forehead before rubbing it through his hair. In the back of his mind he thought that he might go bald prematurely if the Jiralhanae kept insisting on giving him headaches. "Did you actually check the system to make sure it was the maintenance drone?" he asked.

Daedalus glanced up at Prentiss before returning his gaze to the ground, "No holy emissary."

"Well don't you think that's a good idea?" Prentiss asked. He sighed again, "Take a squad of can-toi and Unggoy and have them see what keeps causing the alarm to go off."

The Jiralhanae immediately stood up, his full height towering over the relatively short man who only stood at five foot five inches. Daedalus pounded his fist over his bare fur covered chest, "At once holy emissary." He spun around and stomped off, barking orders at his pack who were busy tormenting a group of Unggoy, and Prentiss reminded himself to make sure the Jiralhanae got extra meat tonight so that they would not be tempted to eat the smaller aliens.

He rubbed both his temples this time, but smiled when he saw his friend Finli o'Tego, the taheen head of security with the head of a weasel, walking towards him.

"Is it just me," Finli said. "Or are the new recruits a little overzealous?"

"They are not overzealous, they are downright fanatical," Prentiss said. "Apparently they used to belong to this ultra religious theocracy before the King brought them into the fold."

"Any idea what this Great Journey is all about?" Finli asked. "Because I think as the holy sword of the great Red King I ought to know."

Prentiss chuckled, "Is that what they are calling you? Well I suppose it's better than holy emissary. From what I can tell the Great Journey has something to do with their religion. Transcendence and all that. The King probably told them that bringing the beams down would help that along. Something to do with sacred rings too but I really haven't paid that much attention."

Finli scratched behind his furry ears, a gesture that Prentiss had picked up to mean confusion. "Think they have any idea that bringing the beams down will kill them all?"

Prentiss shrugged, "If they do they don't care, and if they don't know then it is no concern of ours." He raised his head to look up at the beam passing over head, the murky clouds swimming along its tide, "Another false alarm. Everything in this world has fallen apart. Hell all the worlds are falling apart, even if some are doing it more subtly than others. I can see now why The Crimson King wants to destroy it all and start over." He looked back down at Finli and began to rummage in his pockets for a pack of cigarettes he was sure he put there, "As for me, I say let The Dark Tower fall. What has the universe ever done for me that I should mind its welfare?"

52. Chapter 52

Chapter 52: Sparring

A Brute had bowed on one knee before a human, a relatively short one at that, and as they walked back towards the open portal John wondered just how powerful The Crimson King was that he could convince a large number of Brutes, one of the most religiously fanatical races of the former Covenant Empire, to do that. The Master Chief determined that either The Crimson King had powers of persuasion that went far beyond that of a normal being, or that the Brutes followed him out of fear. The former option seemed the most likely. The Grunts and even the Jackals could be intimidated into following whoever was the strongest at the time, but such methods did not work on Brutes, because they were too prideful and too stupid for simple intimidation to work.

"Ted we need to go. They are going to figure out we're gone any minute," Dinky said, standing by the open portal and looking at it anxiously.

"I would have felt it if they figured out we were gone," Ted said. He looked at John, "We still have twenty minutes before the next check, and I need to talk to John alone." His eyes began to flicker and he looked at the ground, putting a hand up to his chin, "No, you don't like people calling you by your first name. You prefer your rank, Master Chief Petty Officer."

John nodded, "It just Master Chief, or Chief."

The flickering in Ted's eyes stopped and he nodded looking back up at John, "This will only take a few minutes. There is something important I need to tell you." He glanced at Jake who was standing by Cortana, "In private please." John looked back at Cortana and the others. Roland was busy lighting the second to last cigarette in the pack and seemed not to be paying attention, although the Spartan knew that he was, and Eddie was sitting on a boulder fiddling with the safety on the UNSC pistol. His eyes locked with Cortana for a few moments before he followed Ted behind a group of large rocks several meters away from the group.

Once Ted had stopped John said, "Roland will be able to hear us from here."

"It doesn't matter, I just didn't want to others to hear what I'm about to say." Ted paused, his head turned slightly away from the Master Chief, staring off into the distance. His eyes flickered and

he said, "You have fought the big guerillas before, only you call them Brutes or Jiralhanae. One almost killed you on the Unyielding Hierophant, the place where Linda 058 shot four Banshee pilots while holding a sniper rifle with one hand."

"And she was hanging upside down," John added. His shoulders sagged almost unnoticeably at the mention of Linda's name.

Ted's eyes went back to normal and he looked up at John, smiling, "Well I never said I was perfect. For example I have no idea what this Unyielding Hierophant or a Banshee is, I just know that's what you call them." The smile slowly left his face and he grew serious, seeming to age several years as a result, "I know you are an impatient man, although you do not often show it. It may seem like I am wasting your time right now, but please hear me out." John nodded and folded his arms, waiting for Ted to continue, although it was a few moments before the old man did. "I suspect you expect me to tell you some vision of the future I had, but that is not the case. I actually want to tell you about the past, my past." He stared into the space just past John again, although this time his eyes did not flicker, "I suspected I was psychic since I was six, and knew for certain by the time I was sixteen. I knew that my ability was rare, but I did not know just how rare my particular strength in the touch actually was. As it stands I'm the most powerful Breaker in Algul Siento." He took a breath and looked John in the eye, "I am powerful enough that I can kill people with just my mind. It only happened once, and it was an accident. I was being mugged by some kid and he took off with my wallet. As he was running away I got angry, and all it took was one malicious thought towards him. Physically it felt like I was throwing a spear right out of the top of my skull, and when it hit that kid he fell down dead." He shook his head, "I know it was an accident, that I didn't mean to do it, didn't even know I could do it, but it is still something I have to live with."

"Why are you telling me this," John asked, his face expressionless.

"Because," Ted said. "Jake is strong in the touch. Not as strong as me, not strong enough to be lethal, butâ€¦" He paused, as if looking for the right words, "If he were to be pushed, if he thought his life was in danger, if his life was actually in dangerâ€¦" He paused again, gathering his thoughts. "The big guerillas, his ruger pistol is not powerful enough to stop them."

John shook his head, "No."

Ted nodded "Then you know what you have to do." He looked past John towards the other side of The Little Needle rock formation, "There is an old bunker on the other side of the plateau. Should give you folks a place to sleep." He smiled again, "And I'm sure Cortana will be able to get it open."

"She will," John said.

Ted nodded and walked past him, but just as we was about to move around a boulder he turned back to look at the Spartan. "In Algul Siento they feed us these pills every day. It is supposed to amplify our physic abilities, bring down the Beam quicker." He hung his head, "They used children didn't they? Took something out of their minds and crammed it into those pills."

John nodded, "Yes, they are from a place called the Calla."

Ted nodded slowly and then walked away.

â€|

It was a bunker, the walls made of cold concrete, built for some 20th century war by a people long forgotten in mid-world. A people who had destroyed themselves in the days before the rise of Arthur Eld. There were only five rooms inside. One was a small storage closet where food and toiletries had been kept, another was a miniature barracks with ten bunk beds, their foam mattresses still surprisingly soft, or at least what passed for soft in the military (Cortana surmised that what kept everything in the bunker in relatively good condition was the fact that it was sealed off completely from the elements). There was also an officer's quarters with two single beds inside, and Cortana had spent a few moments pushing them together. There were blankets, stiff and stale smelling, but at least they were intact and would provide some warmth. The main room had dozens of crates pushed up against the wall; all stamped with the words Property United States Army, and Cortana was busy looking at one of them. Roland and John sat on two of the boxes opposite each other, the blue steeled revolvers disassembled in front of them and oiled rags in their hands. Eddie sat alone a few meters away, quickly teaching himself how to disassemble and reassemble the UNSC pistol.

"From what I've been able to gather from the computer system in the bunker, this used to be a research facility before it was turned into a storage area," Cortana said, running her hand on the side of the crate that she was looking at. "I found a reference to something called Life Form 8722, but other than the fact that the numbers add up to nineteen there is no hint as to what it might be. There was also a reference to Project Freelancer's forward research facility, but again no hint as to what that actually is or what they were researching there."

"What kind of weapons do they have?" John asked.

Cortana sighed, "The vast majority of the weapons come from Earth's late 20th to early 21st century. M16s, M4s, M9s, modified M14s with optical scopes, M18 Claymore mines, Barrett M90 anti material rifles, and of course your favorite C4."

"How effective are they?" Roland asked, pushing the oiled cloth through one of the chambers in his revolver.

"Against Grunts and Jackals the M16s, M4s, M9s, and M14s should be relatively effective, and of course they will be able to kill can-toi and taheen easily. The problem is the Brutes. With them only the anti material rifle will be anywhere close to effective." She began to rub her chin, still looking at the labeling on the crate in front of her, "I was thinking Jake could use that. It's a little big for him butâ€|"

John shook his head, "Eddie should man it. Jake will be taking part in the main assault."

Eddie looked up and said, "How many of those walking apes do you think I will be able to kill with that thing?"

"A lot, if your good with it," John said, not looking up at him.

"Eddie is a good shot," Roland said. He closed his left eye and looked down the barrel of the great revolver, "As good as Jake is. As good as any gunslinger."

"Still only tied for third in the ka-tet," Eddie mumbled, returning his attention to the pistol.

Cortana put her hands on her hips, "Well who is the best shot then?"

"I am," Roland said almost immediately.

John glanced up at him and then back down at the disassembled revolver, "We'll see." As he began to reassemble it he asked, "Are there any other weapons?"

"Two," Cortana said, looking again at the crate in front of her. "One we already knew about, and the other just confuses me."

"What are they?" John asked.

Cortana smiled, "Come here and take a look. I think you are going to like this."

John holstered the revolver in the gun belt and got up, his knee popping painfully as he did and he bit the inside of his cheek. He walked beside Cortana and read the labeling on the crate that she had been looking at. It stood a few inches taller than him and the words stamped on its wooden surface were in bold black lettering.

****NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS****

*****PROJECT FREELANCER*****

****EXPERIMENTAL POWERED ARMORED EXOSKELETON****

****DEVELOPED AT****

****343 INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH FACILITY, NV****

****PROPERTY UNITED STATES ARMY****

"I thought you might like this," Cortana said as she saw the corners of John's mouth tick upward slightly. "We know that what Project Freelancer developed was similar to the UNSC's MIJOLNIR, although I have still not been able to figure out how they managed to do that."

"Doesn't matter," John said. "When can you have it ready?"

"Don't make me regret showing this to you," Cortana said. She cocked her hips and glanced down at the area just below John's gun belt. "I have a vested interest in making sure you don't stay in the suit twenty-four seven like you use too." She looked back up at him and smiled, "I kind of like you with a tan." Roland glanced over at the two of them quickly and then back down at his revolver, sliding the

bullets slowly into each chamber.

"How long?" John repeated.

Cortana sighed, "Two days." She gestured with her hand at the crates surrounding the one with the armor, "I also need to assemble the machine that will put the armor on for you, considering we don't have any rampant robots to do that for us this time."

"We will need that amount of time to scout the perimeter of the prison," Roland said. He spun the revolver around his finger, the gun turning into a blur as he did, and with a final twirl put it neatly back into its holster.

"I'm going out tonight," John said. He looked at Cortana who had a frown on her face, "I move faster on my own, unless you want Jake to go."

Cortana shook her head, "No, I would rather not have a repeat of what happened at the Dogan."

John nodded. He looked around the room and asked, "What was the weapon that confused you?"

Cortana bent down and picked up a small wooden box, setting it on top of a larger crate. She pointed at the labeling on it, "Other than the symbol of a leaf there is nothing as to what is inside this thing." She began looking at the floor around her, "If I could only find a crowbarâ€¦" The wood splintered as John ripped the top of the box open with his hand, both Roland and Eddie looking up at the sound it made, like dry branches breaking off of a tree. Cortana shrugged, "That works."

John reached in and pulled out a small metal object. It was in the shape of a small sharp dagger on the end connected to a narrow shaft, which in turn connected to a metal loop. "What is it?" Eddie asked, craning his neck to try and see what the Master Chief was holding. Without looking John threw the weapon behind him and it landed in between Eddie's legs, sinking several inches into the crate. With some effort Eddie pulled the weapon out and examined it, "Looks almost like something you would see in a martial arts movie."

"They're shurikens," Cortana said, picking one up as well. "What would the U.S. Army be doing with weapons that belong in feudal Japan?"

Eddie shook his head and gave a forced, half hearted laugh, "You are still trying to make sense out of this stuff?" He stuffed the shuriken into the pocket of his jeans and started to disassemble the pistol again.

"That reminds me," Cortana said and fished into the pocket of her own jeans. She pulled out a vacuum sealed bag of cotton swabs and four sealed vials. "They have DNA analysis here. It will be slow, at least by my standards, but I'm hoping to take a look at yours and Roland's mitochondrial DNA to see just how closely related you two are."

Eddie shook his head again, "I can already tell you the answer to

that. Nineteen generations. I'm willing to place money on it."

Cortana frowned, "You are probably right, but I would rather not assume that to be the case." She tore open the sealed plastic bag of cotton swabs and held one of them up to John's mouth, "Open." John raised an eyebrow and she sighed, "Please." John opened his mouth and she rubbed the swab against the inside of his cheek, quickly placing it into one of the vials once she was done and sealing it back up tightly. Cortana pulled out another swab and walked up to Roland who eyed it suspiciously.

"How is spit going to tell us how many generations apart me and the Spartan are?" Roland asked.

"Deoxyribonucleic Acid," Cortana said, holding the swab a few inches from the gunslingers mouth.

He moved his head away from it and said, "Another non-word."

"It is not a non-word. Now open," Cortana said sternly. The gunslinger sighed and opened his mouth, licking the place where Cortana rubbed him with the swab once she was done. As she put the swab into the vial she said, "I'm going to take a sample of Jake's DNA too. I know he is your adopted son, but there are enough similarities between him, you, and the Chief that I want to make sure. Where is he by the way?"

"Setting up traps to catch whatever game can survive here," Roland replied. He glanced towards the door which opened up to the stair case leading to the outside and said, "He is coming down right now."

"Good," John said. He unhooked his gun belt and set on the crate next to the box of shurikens.

Cortana turned around to look at him, "What are you doing?" John did not reply and he folded his arms as the door opened and Jake walked into the bunker, still wearing the same blood stained shirt as before.

"Jake," John said. The boy looked up at him and he continued, "Go to the middle of the room. We are sparring." Jake looked at Roland who nodded his head. The boy smiled, removed the ruger pistol and the holster that carried it, and walked into the middle of the room.

John began to take a step forward but Cortana put a hand on his chest. "What do you think you are doing?" she whispered to him. "He's twelve. You can't expect him to fight you."

John shook his head, "He is old enough. You did not see what we saw underneath the Dixie Pig, or what he did to the Wolves back in the Calla."

He started to move forward again but Cortana pressed harder, "You could kill him if you are not careful." Her eyes widened as she saw the look he was giving her, recognizing it instantly. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her hand off his chest, and then walked past her. John unsheathed his combat knife and without any warning flung it end

over end at Jake's head. The boy's hand snapped upward, the movement so fast it was almost undetectable, and he caught the knife by the handle, the tip of the blade inches from his face.

John nodded, "Good." Cortana sat down on the crate next to Roland, looking worryingly between the two of them. "Has Roland taught you hand to hand techniques?"

Jake twirled the combat knife easily in his hand before grasping it firmly again, the point of the knife facing away from his body, and the laser sharpened blade facing outward towards John. "He has taught me a few things. What are the rules?"

"None," John said. "You try to kill me, and I try to kill you."

The smile on Jake's face faded, "Kill you?"

"Yes," John said his voice cold. "Or I will." He widened his stance and brought his fists up, "Begin."

Jake hesitated, and then ran towards the Master Chief, slashing the combat knife outwards towards his abdomen. The Spartan sensed that the boy was holding back, not really meaning to harm him, and he dodged his movements easily by stepping backwards, and then around Jake. The boy attempted to turn around to face him again, but John brought up his leg and kicked Jake in the side, holding back just enough of his strength so as to not shatter his ribs. Jake fell to the ground coughing, and John stood over him, "Get up," He said. "We are fighting Brutes. They are taller and stronger than me, and they will not let you lie on the ground while you catch your breath." He kicked Jake in the stomach and the boy went up into the air, landing back on the concrete three meters away.

Cortana attempted to stand up but Roland threw out an arm over her chest, "Let them finish."

Jake quickly got onto his feet, twirled the knife in his hand until the tip of the blade was held by his thumb and forefinger and threw it at the Master Chief. John tilted his head as the knife sailed past his head, and it landed with a clang against the far wall. "Do not throw your knife unless you know you are not going to miss."

"I didn't," Jake said, gritting his teeth, standing uneasily on his two legs. John felt a warm trickle run down his cheek and for half a second was distracted. Jake took his opportunity and charged at him, jabbing with his fist towards the Master Chief's kidney. John caught the boy's fist with his hand and Jake swung with his left towards his other kidney, but that one was caught as well. John brought his knee up to Jake's stomach and Cortana could almost feel the rush of air that escaped from his lungs. Moving around the boy again who was busy clutching his stomach in pain, John brought his elbow down on the back of his head and Jake went flying forward, holding out his hands just in time to avoid smashing his face on the concrete. He spun around on his back, planning on kicking upward into the Spartan's groin, but his eyes grew wide as the Master Chief brought his boot up over Jake's head.

At this Cortana pushed Roland's arm out of the way and stood up, "John stop!" He ignored her and brought the back of his heel down. It stopped just inches from Jake's head as if struck by an invisible

barrier. There was the rushing sound of wind and Cortana was knocked off her feet and back down on the crate. She looked up quickly and saw John flying through the air. He hit the far wall and the concrete crumbled as his body connected.

Eddie stared at him, his mouth open, as John stood slowly up and wiped the blood off the back of his head which was flowing from an open cut. "Holy shit," Eddie muttered. He looked at Jake who was slowly rising to his feet, "Holy fucking shit."

Jake's lip was bleeding and he smiled as he wiped it off with the back of his forearm, "I got you."

John nodded, "Good." He looked down and saw the combat knife lying on the floor beside him. He kicked it over to Jake who picked it up, "Again."

â€|

Cortana frowned as Jake took his blood stained shirt off. His stomach was covered in dark welts, and bruises were all over his arms and shoulders, his skin more black and blue than its normal tanned white complexion. They were in what was to be her and John's room, Cortana sitting in the middle of the two single beds that had been pushed together while Jake stood in front of her. "How do you feel?" she asked.

"Sore," Jake said, tossing the shirt into the corner. "But I'm alright."

"You better be," Cortana muttered, ripping open a vacuum sealed package of small sized tan ACU shirts.

Jake smiled, "It was fun once I got the hang of it. I tossed John back four times."

"And he tossed you around the room more times than I could count," Cortana said, unfolding one of the shirts.

Jake stopped smiling and asked, "You are not mad at him are you?"

Cortana shook her head, "No, at least not now that I understand what he was doing." She handed a shirt to him and watched as he pulled it over his head, "Me and him just see you differently, that's all."

"I think he sees me the same way Roland does," Jake said, tucking the shirt into his jeans. "A gunslinger, not a kid."

Cortana gave a half smile, "And that is exactly the problem." She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead, "Go get some sleep, I'm going to need your help tomorrow getting the MJOLNIR ready."

Jake shrugged his shoulders, "Or me and John could spend the day sparring."

Cortana punched him lightly in the shoulder and the boy winced as her fist connected with a bruise, "Don't push your luck. Now go to bed."

Jake sighed, "Alright." He waved at her as he walked out of the room, "Night." Cortana waited for him to leave and then reached into her pocket. She pulled out the last empty vial and the bag of cotton swabs. She took one and rubbed it against the inside of her mouth.

â€|

She felt the bed next to her sag as John got in, and the movement caused her to wake up. The room was almost completely dark, but the red light coming from the fire alarm allowed her eyes to adjust enough to see that he had his shirt off and was currently pulling his dog tags off his head. He placed them on the metal bed post beside him and looked down at her, "You're awake."

"I missed you too," she said. "How long were you gone?"

"Ten hours," John said. "I have most of Alzul Siento scouted out."

Cortana sat up in the bed and asked, "Ten hours, is it morning already?"

In the darkness she just barely saw him shake his head, "No it's still dark out. Roland was right, the days are not normal anymore." He reached out and put his hand on top of hers, "Are you angry?"

Cortana sighed, "No, I was just scared. I wasn't sure how far you would go, or what you were trying to do." She looked at his face and found his eyes in the darkness, "You care about him don't you?" In the dark John's head nodded and she smiled at him, "Are you tired?"

"No, "

"Neither am I," Cortana said. She reached out with her hand and felt for his face. When she found it she moved her lips in to his. Pulling away she let the blanket fall off her shoulders, "And at least one of us is already undressed."

53. Chapter 53

Chapter 53: Planning for the Future

The nails creaked as they were pulled out of the wood, having the same effect on the ears as nails on a chalkboard, and Cortana gave one last tug with the crowbar before the first board containing the powered armored exoskeleton was wrenched free. She handed the crowbar off to Jake who began working on the other boxes and had her first look inside. The armor itself was arranged neatly on a metal manikin, all of its functioning parts on full display. It looked almost exactly like John 117's Mark VI MJOLNIR and superficially there was only one key difference. While John's old armor had been green, this one was completely grey with the exception of a yellow stripe running down the center of the helmet, and yellow shoulder blades. Cortana touched the helmet with her hand and felt the familiar jolt as her consciousness connected with the armor's systems. What she saw in the system caused her to pause. "Hmm, that's interesting."

"What is?" Jake asked, pulling the top off of another crate.

"A few things. First this armor is exactly the same as the UNSC MJOLNIR, and there are almost no differences to speak of. Second, this armor is almost an exact fit for John, which while it saves me time making adjustments, the odds of that happening are slim."

"Makes sense to me," Jake said, and Cortana turned around to look at him. He shrugged his shoulders, "With all the coincidences we have run into in mid-world I would think you would almost expect that armor to be an exact fit for him."

"I suppose your right," Cortana said, returning her full attention back to the armor and reentering the system. "It makes sense in an illogical way, but then again illogic has never been my strong suit."

"So what else is interesting?" Jake asked.

"Nothing really, except that the person who use to wear this armor had the call sign Agent Washington." She dropped her hand from the helmet and turned around to look at the crates Jake had opened. Cortana picked up a part to one of the robotic arms that would help assemble the suit over John's body, "Guess this gives new meaning to some assembly required. This thing must be a thousand pieces."

Jake scratched his head, "Any directions?"

Cortana shook her head, "Don't need them, I can do this from memory. I had a full five seconds to look at the schematics for the armor assembly on the Infinity before they blocked me out of the system which was more than enough time."

Jake looked at her and then back down at the crate in front of him which contained dozens of parts that he could not even begin to guess the function of, "If you say so."

â€|

The darkness of the room was almost like a blanket in and of itself, shielding John and Cortana from the rest of the world as they lay together in the bed. His arm was around her shoulder and she rubbed her head into his neck, closing her eyes and taking in John's smell. It was far from a perfect setting, the thin foam mattress provided little actual comfort, as did the blanket which itched and was made with a synthetic material that had the similar texture of wool.

"Are you still awake?" Cortana asked, and John responded by squeezing her shoulder. "Have you thought about what we might do after this is over?"

"We already talked about this in Fedic. We go to the Tet Corporation and then the writer," John said.

Cortana sighed, and he could feel her breath against his neck, "I'm not talking about after Algul Siento. I mean after everything. If we win what do we do and you do? Where do we go?"

"We go back to the UNSC," John said. He began to close his eyes, thinking the conversation over, but Cortana continued talking.

"And if the UNSC has been destroyed, then what? I know you said we would have each other, but that doesn't mean we can stay there if our world is gone. We would need to go somewhere else."

John opened his eyes and stared into the thick, nearly tangible darkness above his head. "I have not thought that far." He turned his head to look at her, and could just barely make out the electric spark in her blue eyes. Two small pinpoints of light that was Cortana in the otherwise slate black night. "Where would you want to go?"

Cortana smiled, and although he could not see it, he could sense it, "We could go anywhere we wanted. Any time period, any reality, any place. If I can make portals into other worlds like I made the portal that brought us here then there is no limit to where we could go." She rubbed her hand along his bare chest, tracing any scar she found with her fingers, some raising above the skin and others as smooth as glass. "I would take you somewhere I could take care of you. Someplace I could keep you safe."

John closed his eyes and his forehead connected with hers as they lay there, "You have already planned where you want to go." It was not a question, and John knew that Cortana planned everything out well in advance.

"I was thinking Earth's mid 20th century," Cortana said, still tracing her fingers along his chest.

This caused John to open one eye, "Why? There is very little technology in that time period."

He felt Cortana nod her head on the pillow next to him, "That's exactly why I picked it. I need new data like an addict needs a drug. In many ways I'm still an AI. But if we go there, if we go to a place where the technology is minimal, then I can actually focus on being completely human."

"You are already human," John said. He ran a hand through her hair and tucked the few stray strands behind her head.

He felt Cortana shake her head, "Not really, not as much as I want to be." She took her hand off his chest and raised it into the air with the palm facing the ceiling. They were both bathed in a blood red glow as the equations raced up her arms, and electricity raced between the tips of her fingers. She closed her hand into a fist and the lines of code stopped flowing, casting them both back into the dark. "Until I can no longer do that, I won't consider myself to be fully human. I want to be normal, not something that is part biological and part computer."

"We have never been normal," John said.

Cortana brought her hand back down to his chest and continued her ministrations along his scars, "No, we haven't, and there is a part of me that knows we never will be no matter where we go. Wherever we go there will be fighting, and if there is fighting I know you will be somewhere in the middle of it. But if we go to the mid 20th

century, then you won't be fighting Covenant, Flood, or Prometheans, and you will have your augmentations so I don't have to worry about you." She took her hand off his chest and began rubbing it through his graying brown hair, "You don't like my idea do you?"

"I don't dislike it," John said. "I'll think about it."

"Well," Cortana said. "If you come up with a better place to go then tell me." John closed his eyes as she rubbed his hair, and tried to clear his mind and focus on the sensation of her touching him. It mostly worked. Cortana bit her bottom lip, wondering if it was the right time to bring the next subject up to him. Her right hand drifted towards her stomach and she decided that it was, "There is something else. I took one other DNA sample after I took yours, Roland, and Jake's. I took a sample of my own DNA."

"Why," John asked, not opening his eyes.

Cortana bit her lip harder, "I wanted to compare my DNA with yours, in case—" She took his hand in hers and placed it on her stomach, "Well just in case." John opened his eyes and looked down at where she had placed his hand and then back up at her. Cortana continued, taking a deep breath before she did, "You know I always do my research, even when it comes to us having kids."

_Kids, _John thought. As he moved his hand away from her stomach he said, "I wouldn't be a good father."

"You would," Cortana said. "You care about Jake, even if you show it differently than I do."

"I put bruises on most of his upper body," John said. He turned fully on his back, but Cortana moved with him, wrapping her left arm around his middle.

"You did that to make sure he would stay alive when it comes time to fight the Brutes. He looks up to you. You know that right?"

"He is a lot like me. A lot like Roland," John said. "If he was a Spartan then he would be better than me, even at twelve."

Cortana yawned, John both hearing it and feeling her chin dig into his shoulder as she opened her mouth, and her arm gripped him tighter. "He is a gunslinger, and he is always going to see himself that way. Even if you somehow managed to get him to wear a suit of MJOLNIR." Digging her head deeper into his neck she asked, "So what do you think about what I said?"

"Kids?" John asked, and he felt Cortana nod her head before yawning again. "I don't think I'm ready."

Cortana closed her eyes and felt herself drifting off to sleep, "Well it may be a good idea to get ready. It's not like we have been using protection." John turned to look at her and Cortana's next words came out in a half coherent mumble, "I could be pregnant already." Her breathing grew heavy and John could tell that she had gone to sleep, his arm trapped underneath her already prickling with the needles of numbness. He laid there awake for several more hours, staring up at the pitch black ceiling overhead.

54. Chapter 54

Chapter 54: Honest Mistakes

Cortana bolted upright, gasping for breath, and she could feel that her forehead was covered in a cool sweat. Her arms were shaking badly, both because the covers had fallen over her shoulders, and because her mind was running through thoughts so fast that she could hardly hold on to them, and she was infected with the sudden and terrible urge to get up and move, to run. To run as fast and as hard as she could until her lungs felt like they were on fire and her muscles were filled with acid, and when she could no longer run she would crawl. At first it did not matter to her where she ran to, just as long as she ran. _But it does matter, _she thought, attempting to control her breathing and do away with the need to move, to flee. _Because would be running to The Dark Tower. It's calling me. It is always calling. _She had dreamt of the Tower again and its soot black marble face, and of Roland coming to it at dusk, walking through the field of roses, winding his horn. Her hand fell to the place just beside her where John slept, but her palm only touched the empty mattress, and she felt the panic start to rise in her again.

"John?" Cortana stood up and fumbled on the wall for the lights, finally finding the switch and flicking it on. Her eyes winced as the dull florescent lights struggled to life, like every other piece of technology left in mid-world these lights were a broken and dying thing, clinging on to existence simply for the sake of it. Electric blue eyes darted around the room, but she could find no sign of her Spartan, and the true panic was about to set in when the door to the room opened and John walked through. His pupils dilated quickly to compensated for the light, and his eyes went from the empty bed to Cortana standing at the light switch, completely naked and a hand over her chest taking in deep breaths of relief. "Where were you?" she asked, half running up to him and wrapping her arms around his middle. John stiffened at first, mostly out of surprise, but quickly relaxed and put his arms around her shoulders.

"I couldn't sleep. I was talking with Roland," he said. John pushed her away slightly and looked into her eyes. "What happened?"

"Just a bad dream," She said, her shoulders sagging. "I'm sorry. I overreacted to you being gone."

John's light blue eyes lingered on her arm where he had bruised her after dreaming about the Battle of Jericho Hill. "I've overreacted too. It's okay."

"Okay," Cortana half said half sighed. She moved to the bed, wrapping the stiff blanket around her shoulders, her body feeling the full affects of the cool bunker air, and attempted to get warm. The mattress in front of her sagged considerable as John sat down on it, elbows on his knees and staring at the grey concrete wall a few feet away from him. The mattress sagged further, the bed itself pushed almost to its breaking point, as Cortana inched towards him and put her head on his arm. "Why could you not sleep?" she asked.

"Thinking," John said. He did not look at her, but shifted his body so that she could sit closer to him.

After moving herself the few extra inches towards him she asked, "Where you thinking about what we were talking about earlier?"

"Yes," John said.

Cortana put a hand up to his chin and turned his head to look at her, "It was just a thought John. We don't have to go anywhere you don't want to."

He turned his head away and looked at the wall again, "It's not that I'm worried about."

Cortana subconsciously reached a hand under the blanket and put it over her stomach, "That I might be pregnant?" John nodded and she looked down at the ground. "I don't know yet if I am or not, just that I want to be."

"I know," John said. "You would be a good mother; it's me I'm worried about." He paused, and Cortana opened her mouth to respond but he continued talking. "I am almost twice your biological age, all I know how to do is fight and I can't do that forever." He looked at her, "Every time I fight it becomes harder to do. My joints hurt, my scars hurt, and my muscles become sore easier. My eyesight, hearing, and reflexes are still good, but not as good as they once were." He looked back at the wall, "But it's still the only thing I know how to do, and you don't need me out fighting while you're raising a child." Cortana looked at him, her eyes going over every single feature on his face, studying every hint of emotion. Where she found it most was in his eyes, the rest of his face remaining placid.

_This is the most he has ever talked about his feelings to me, _she thought. Cortana reached through the blanket and took his hand, John squeezing it back. _Where did this come from? _

John began speaking again, "Cortana Iâ€|" the word stuck to the walls of his throat and refused to dislodge itself, and John's jaw grew rigid as he tried to force himself to say it. His jaw loosened, the word climbing back down his throat, and so he settled for saying the next best thing, "I care about you." He brought his hand up to his forehead and rubbed it, "I'm sorry."

Cortana craned her neck to look at him in the eyes, "John, I did not tell you that I loved you expecting to hear it back."

"You should hear it," John said, and then thought, _because I do.

—

Cortana smiled at him, and the clouded feelings of doubt he felt lifted slightly. "I told you that you were a hard man to love. A very hard man to love."

"Then why do you?"

She gave a half laugh, shaking her head, "I had nearly five years with just my thoughts to figure out the answer to that. If I could not come up with an answer then, then I can't now. I just know that I do."

"You deserve better," John said.

"I don't want better, I want you. She began to lean in to kiss him, but John met her lips halfway, taking her cheek into his hand. When he pulled away her smile widened, "That is the first time you have ever kissed me first." Cortana leaned in again, but he took her by the shoulders and swiftly, but gently, laid her down on her back, slipping off his jeans as he did. As he positioned himself over top of her, Cortana put a hand on his chest, "Are you sure? I thought you didn't wantâ€|"

"I do," John said, intercepting her. He moved his hips forward and Cortana bit down on her lip, wrapping her arms around his waist.

â€|

"KUNAI" UZAMAKI MODEL

Serial # 454-51-BA NUMK

PROPERTY UNITED STATES ARMY

Electric blue eyes read the letters and numbers imprinted on the base of the shuriken. _No, _Cortana thought. _This is a kunai, not a shuriken. _She closed her eyes and focused, trying to clear her mind of the misthought. It only partially worked, as a part of her, not the majority but a sizable chunk, still thought that the weapon in front of her was named a shuriken. The ka-tet sat in a circle in the same order as they had in Fedic, an empty spot still reserved for Susannah as if she were expected to arrive any second. She held up the, _Kunai, this is a kunai, _to John and asked, "Chief, what is this weapon called?"

He raised an eyebrow at her and almost immediately said, "It's a shuriken." He stared at the kunai for a few seconds longer and his eyebrows furrowed.

Cortana gave a slight smile, "That's not right is it?"

"No," John said slowly, his eyebrows still furrowed.

Roland looked between them, his eyes eventually landing on Cortana, "You said the other day that the weapon was called a shuriken."

"I know I did, and I was wrong. I have a theory as to why if you want to hear it."

"Other than the fact that you're just human?" Eddie asked. A bit of his old humor had crept into his voice, but it was still mostly absent. His eyes every so often would wander to the place where Susannah should have been sitting next to him, and he would quickly catch himself and return his attention back to the group.

Cortana shook her head, "Thanks for the compliment, but my memory is nearly perfect."

"It is," Jake said, nodding with his head over to the mostly completed armor assembly. "She has put most of that together using nothing but her memory."

Eddie turned his head around to look at the partially constructed machine, and then looked back at Cortana, "Okay, so what is your theory?"

"The author made a mistake. He thought these kunai were called shuriken, and somehow that caused me to think the same as well. To put it in layman's terms, if I was still purely digital it would be as if someone had written over my coding, and not even a genius level computer expert would have been able to do that with me," Cortana said.

"But you're saying that this guy was able to do that just by writing the wrong thing?" Eddie asked. "That idea is just a bit scary don't you think?"

Cortana sighed and handed the kunai off to John who flipped it over and started reading the labeling intently, "It is. He changed part of my thought process without even trying. Essentially part of his thoughts became my own."

"That is opening up a whole lot of doors I would rather remain closed," Eddie said. His eyes went over to Susannah's spot again, and he immediately returned them back to the group. Scratching the top of his head he asked, "Okay, so I'm pretty sure the guy who wrote about me was Stephen King. Now say Stephen wanted to write about how I live in New York, but he either has never been there himself or only went a few times and doesn't really know the geography. According to you he could have made a mistake while writing and instead of Co-Op City being in Brooklyn where I grew up it could be someplace completely different."

Cortana brought a hand up to her chin, considering what he said, and then closed her eyes to tap into her data streams that swam continuously like a flowing river deep in her subconscious. After finding what she was looking for she opened her eyes and said, "Eddie, Co-Op city isn't in Brooklyn. It's in the Bronx."

Eddie's eyebrows furrowed much in the same way John's had and he looked at the cement floor in front of him, "That can't be right. I was born and raised in Co-Op City. It has always been in Brooklyn." He looked up at her, "Are you sure about that?"

She nodded, "Unfortunately yes. Now the real question is did Stephen King write about Co-Op City being in Brooklyn because that's where it is in your reality, or did his mistake somehow change your reality to fit his story?"

"A question," Roland said, barely hiding his impatience. "We could spend all day asking ourselves and still get no closer to the answer. Cortana, what did our," he paused; trying to think of the non-word she had used but could not remember it. "What did our spit tell you about our lineage?"

"DNA," Cortana said slowly. "It's not that hard to remember. I almost hate to admit it but Eddie was right. You two are nineteen generations apart, at least going back through the matriarchal family tree." She looked at Jake, "And as far as you go, you are actually more likely to be one of the Chief's ancestors, although it's impossible to tell for sure."

"Really?" Jake asked, looking up at John, cocking his head at him. "I guess I can sort of see the resemblance." He looked back at Cortana, "If the Chief and Roland are so far apart, then why do they seem so similar. You know, brown hair, light blue eyes."

"Overall grumpiness," Eddie added dryly, ignoring the cold glares he got from both John and Roland.

Cortana shrugged, "Before mid-world I would have said that was a coincidence, but now I'm not so sure. What I can tell you is that light blue eyes, which is normally a recessive trait, is actually a dominate gene for both the Chief and Roland." She looked at Jake, "For you blue eyes are the normal recessive, so I'm thinking you are considered of the Line of Eld because you are Roland's adoptive son." She turned her attention back to the ka-tet as a whole, "I have a few more theories if you want to hear them."

"Sure, it's been interesting so far," Jake said. He glanced at Roland, sensing his impatience and added, "Might want to make it quick though. Roland would normally just call this ka and be done with it."

"Of course. Ka is the magical cure all," Eddie said.

Cortana gave him a small smile and thought _At least he is trying. _She began talking again, "The first is how the Chief and Roland ended up in two different realities. Obviously the Line of Eld originated in mid-world, and this is where Roland was born. Based on what you three told me about the portal at Turtleback Lane, what Roland calls a thinny, I'm guessing that at some point someone directly related to Arthur Eld passed through a thinny and into the reality the UNSC is from. Certainly can't prove that is what happened, but it makes the most sense."

"You are probably right," the gunslinger said. He began twirling his fingers, his impatience now on full display, "And your other idea?"

"I was just getting to that," Cortana said, looking at him through the corners of her eyes. "My other theory is about your age Roland, and why everything in this bunker is in such relatively good condition. You said yourself that time has a way of slipping in mid-world. Me and the Chief experienced something similar to that ourselves while using a Forerunner artifact during Operation First Strike, only in your case it seems to be much more severe."

"Aye," Roland said. "Time slips around me. There have been times were decades have passed around me, although I only perceive them as passing within a few weeks."

Cortana nodded, "Basically you are a walking time space anomaly, and I believe that the same thing happened in this bunker. None of this equipment should be anywhere near working order after sitting here for over two millennia, yet it is." She rubbed her finger on the floor and held it up, "There is not even any dust here."

"Time has not sped up outside since we have been here," John said. "If anything it has slowed down."

"Yes, because we are here, if that makes any sense."

John shook his head, "No, but I trust it does for you."

"Any more ideas?" Roland asked, preparing to twirl his fingers again, but Cortana shook her head. He turned to John, "You have scouted the prison, therefore you should plan the attack."

John nodded. He took the shuriken; _Kunai, _he mentally corrected himself, and began to carve a rough map of Algul Siento on the floor as well as its surrounding area. He drew two straight lines next to the drawing of the prison and turned to Roland, "Compass." Roland pulled out a compass from his satchel, the casing made of mahogany and the declinations written out in ornate old English lettering, and placed it on the floor next to the drawing. Whereas the compass should have indicated that the train tracks were running from west to east, instead it showed that they were running from south to north with the needle itself slowly inching its way around counter clockwise, before jumping several degrees clockwise. John sighed and pushed the compass away, drawing a rough one himself next to the map. He put the tip of the kunai at each point and said, "Arbitrary north, arbitrary south, arbitrary east, and arbitrary west. Understood?" He looked up to make sure everybody nodded in agreement and turned to Cortana, "What is the ETA on the MJOLNIR?"

"A few more hours and it will be ready," she said.

John nodded and continued, "Cortana will create a portal for me so that I can infiltrate the facility as soon as night falls. Once inside I will plant explosives here," he pointed at an ammo depot, "here," he pointed at an area where the Grunts' methane was kept, "and here," he finally pointed at the building marked barracks. He pointed with the kunai at the circles surrounding the perimeter of the prison, "At daybreak Roland, Jake, and Cortana will use the," he paused for a moment and slowly said, "kunai to take out the Jackal sentries at the six watchtowers. Cortana has the two sentries at arbitrary southeast, Roland has the two at arbitrary west, and Jake has the two at arbitrary northeast. I will have also placed C4 around the perimeter to create entry points," he pointed at the spots where he planned on placing the explosives, marking them with an X. "Once the sentries are taken out I will detonate the C4. Jake will work his way in from arbitrary north, Roland from arbitrary west, Cortana from arbitrary south, and I will push from inside the prison from arbitrary east."

"We will be separated," Roland said.

John nodded, "We will hit them from multiple directions at once, make them assume that we are a larger force than we actually are. We work our way into the middle and surround them." He drew an X in the middle of the prison and circled it, "That is our final rallying point."

"And where do I come in?" Eddie asked.

John looked up at him and pointed where he had drawn the plateau. "You will provide over watch and sniper support for the operation using the M90."

"And that thing can really blow shit apart?" Eddie asked.

"It's not as effective as the UNSC Sniper Rifle System 99-S5 Anti-Material," Cortana said. "But if you make sure to aim for the Brutes' heads it should work. Everything else, like you said, will be blown apart."

Eddie nodded, "Eyes and throat."

55. Chapter 55

Chapter 55: Morning Sickness

At nearly four days old he was still just a child. Granted these four days had lasted closer to a week and a half, for as the world around him had moved on time had lost nearly all of its meaning. His father knew that better than anyone, had watched as ten centuries had passed in mid-world while he himself aged slowly. The next four days may pass in the span of two, or perhaps may even last a whole month. Things sped up and slowed down frequently. Science had failed, the Old People had failed, the gunslingers of Gilead had failed, magic had failed, and now time which was the only tangible barrier delaying the fall of The Dark Tower had failed as well, or so Mordred Deschain thought. Yet at four days old, with the body now of a six year old, he was still just a child, and he was lonely. He stood in front of the double iron wrought doors that led to the place where his father had gone. His other family was there as well, as close to family as Mordred would ever have or want, and his family was not meant to be met with a warm embrace, but with the cold clutches of death. Mordred's uncle was beyond the door, as was the man who was married to what he considered his brownie mother, and his brother, the boy his father had the nerve to call his true son. More importantly though, perhaps even more important than the fact that his father was beyond the door, was that the woman who carried the usurper in her womb was there as well. For Mordred was the only true heir to Arthur Eld. His father was old, and Mordred would soon kill him. Whether or not this would be before or after he killed the blue woman had yet to be decided, but he would die nonetheless.

The Crimson King was nearly insane, and the child cared little for his plans to destroy everything, for after everything was gone Mordred was sure only he would be left to inherit all. He was still just a child though, and like all children he had fears, deep irrational fears that hide in the closets of our minds. The closets we put padlocks on and board up when we grow older and decide that to be scared of such things is foolish, but they are still there and sometimes we still remember them. Sometimes the lock breaks and our fears coming crashing into us like a sledgehammer. Mordred would learn that eventually, but for now he is still a child, and all children have some fear of their father. Fear that he would be punished, and so Mordred had waited, hesitated even now that he was old enough to travel without turning into his spider form which consumed vast amounts of energy.

He was cold. Not just in his heart, in his mind, and in his light blue gunslinger eyes, but the bare pink feet still swollen with baby fat that lay on the concrete were cold as well, and the child shivered. At three days he at last had control of his bowls, learned how to speak in that rudimentary sort of way that children below the age of reason use, and was ambidextrous enough to fashion clothing.

He wore a small tan ACU shirt which hung below his waist, ACU pants which had been roughly cut off at the knees so that he could wear them without tripping, and a belt around his middle synched as tight as he could make it. If you were to see him now you would likely laugh, before screaming in terror as he methodically destroyed your mind, and maybe in the insanity that followed you would have one last chuckle as you watched him eat you alive. Mordred hesitated, still fearful, still a child, and stared at the doors that led to the train station at Algul Siento, wondering if he had the nerve to open them. All it would take was a thought from him, but no matter how hard he tried that thought did not come. So he stood there and shivered in the cold again.

The dim darkness was interrupted by a strangled white light, and for a moment Mordred's closet had swung wide opened, and he thought that the woman who he perhaps feared more than his father was here. It was not though, and he nearly giggled like the child he truly was at what he saw. It was a miniature of his uncle when he wore the armor standing upon a pedestal, a being made purely of light. Of course Mordred knew what this being truly was, that this Epsilon or Church as he sometimes called himself was known as an AI. This knowledge was more instinct than anything, and part of his young mind still thought of things in simplistic terms. The being of light spoke.

"Hey asshole. Door won't open unless you have the password."

Mordred cocked his head at Church, considering him. His mind lashed out at the AI with the force of a whip and Church's avatar briefly glowed red as Mordred pilfered through his data streams as will. When he found what he was looking for Mordred replied. (The password is password)

"Not bad," Church said, and turned his avatar towards the door. "Guess I have to open it for you then. Oh wait a minute." Church turned back to Mordred and the child raised an eyebrow, "Did you say password? Sorry I thought you said go fuck yourself. Guess I can't open it for you after all."

Mordred's fists clenched and he hit the AI with the full brunt of his mind, the air itself shimmering before him. Church's avatar fell on its back and was now a deep dark and soulless Crimson Red. The child turned his attention to the door, resolved now to go through and leave this being of light to the Rampancy it would now surely endure, but as he mentally touched it the door refused to yield. He pushed further, but still it would not budge, and Mordred felt a cold fury burn within him. He walked slowly up to Church. (Open the door, or I will feast upon your bones)

"Joke's on you cockbite. I don't have any bones, lost my body a long time ago," Church said. He got on one knee and raised his middle finger at Mordred, and was in turn struck down again by another devastating psychic wave. The AI made a coughing sound while flat on his virtual back and slowly rose to his knee again, "You think you can waltz into my home, wreck the place, and then just leave. Who do you think you fucking are?"

Mordred smiled, the baby teeth that he still possessed and would likely be rid of before the day was through, on full display. (I? I am a monument to all my father's sins) The back of his memory prickled, the inner instinct of knowledge tugging on his higher functions, but

he ignored it. He was after all still a child, and Mordred liked to play with his food. He reached out his hand and flattened his palm out facing skyward. Church disappeared from the pedestal and reappeared in the chubby pink hand, falling down again on his back as he did. (You are not the meal of flesh and bone I prefer, but the mind needs to be fed as well) With that Mordred closed his fist and Church disintegrated in a shower of data.

Mordred closed his eyes, preparing to process all the thoughts, emotions, and memories that made up the former being of light. Pain instantly seized him and Mordred clutched the sides of his head, screaming in agony. His first instinct as his knees hit the floor was to yell for his mother, but then he remembered he did not have one. He had killed his mother, had killed both his mothers, and he hated his father far too much to even think of calling for him. Church's memories pummeled against his skull, the pain seeping into his eyes and making the world around him grow black. Memories, memories of a woman named Allison, of her dying over and over again. Again and again they came at him, blocking all sense and reason, what little sense and reason a child is expected to have, and at last just as Mordred was about to lose consciousness raw instinct took over. He balled his hands into fists and stuck the ground, the concrete shattering into dust beneath him, and he yelled with all the force of his considerable mind (ENOUGH!) The computer terminals, what was left of them, exploded. Sparks cascaded onto him, a few burning deep into his skin. Behind him the gears that operated the doorway loosened, falling heavily onto the ground and vibrating the chamber itself. The wrought iron doors buckled, and just when they looked as if they would fall down as well the screaming stopped. Mordred lay there breathless, curled into a ball. He felt tired, far too tired to move, but still he weakly reached out with his mind to open the doors, but felt nothing. They would never be used again. The child's eyes grew heavy and he fought back a shiver as he curled deeper into a ball. His breathing slowed and Mordred went to sleep, his thumb eventually finding his mouth. In his dreams he set about the work necessary to forget all about Allison, and a box canyon in the middle of nowhere.

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Robotic arms moved in a rhythmic dance, quickly fastening the multiple layers of armor onto Spartan 117. Cortana watched, frowning, as John's body was incased in the suit. With a final click the chest plate was put into place, and the helmet was fitted snugly, far too snugly in Cortana's opinion, over his head. Stepping out of the machine John flexed his arms and legs, going through the normal routine of checking the armor's dexterity as Cortana put a hand on the chest plate and mentally checked the systems. Once she was done John saw a green status light blink once in the upper right corner of his heads up display and he frowned slightly. He moved his eyes to Cortana who had removed her hand from him and asked, "What's wrong?"

Cortana shook her head, "Nothing. I just got use to seeing you out of your armor."

"I will have to take it off again soon," John said. His voice was the same steady monotone that it always was, but he mentally scolded himself for the slight hint of regret that seeped out into his words. He had missed wearing the armor, and a part of him did not like that

he would only be wearing it again for such a short time.

"Of course you will," Cortana said, putting her hands on her hip. "But knowing you, you'll wait till the last minute to take it off, and will put it back on again as soon as we come back from New York."

John said nothing for a moment, and then reached up to grab the sides of his helmet. It came off with a hiss and he turned it over in his hands as if examining it, "The helmet is not an exact fit. I might have to take it off to readjust it often."

Cortana's lips turned upward, "Thank you John." He shrugged and tucked the helmet neatly under his right arm.

"Will it be safe for you to open the portal?" he asked, and she noticed his eyes quickly glancing down at her stomach before returning back to hers.

"It's just a nosebleed. I'll live." She took a step closer and poked him in his armored abdomen, "What I need from you is to promise me that you will be safe." He gave her a smile, and although it was small Cortana thought it was the biggest he had ever given her. He leaned forward and kissed her fully, her right hand reaching for the back of his head as he did. When it broke her eyes were still closed as she asked, "What exactly has gotten into you lately? You have never been like this." Her smile faltered as she opened her eyes and looked into his. It was as if he was examining her, trying to remember every single feature. She shook the thought away and her smile resumed. As they walked out of the bunker Cortana completely forgot that he did not make the promise to her.

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What passed for early morning in Thunderclap began with a touch of pink on the horizon. The sunrise, or at least the closest thing to a sunrise, the bright star itself being mostly blocked by the swollen clouds of smog laced with the remnants of radiation from the Old People's wars, started in what had used to be north. It was in this thin pink light that Cortana, away from the sight and ears of Jake and Eddie (But not of Roland who heard everything. Indeed she would have to travel at least a wheel not to be heard by him) leaned up against a boulder and vomited. Stars tiptoed in and out of her vision as she looked dully at the MRE breakfast strewn across the rocks beneath her feet. Still in the grip of nausea she swayed slightly as she walked away, an M14 slung over her back, and climbed a small crest where Eddie sat checking the M90. He looked up at her, only seeing her silhouette in the near dark morning hours, and Cortana could just make out a worried expression on his face.

"Are you alright? You were gone for a while," he said.

Cortana waved her hand, which brought about another bout of dizziness, "I'm fine. Just needed some time to think."

"You're worried about him aren't you?" Eddie asked. Cortana nodded, giving him a partial truth. Eddie slapped in a five round magazine, riding the bolt forward and feeding the first 50 caliber round into place. "Well don't be. Just remember that I'm up here watching your asses." He looked up at her, finding the electric blue points of

light that were here eyes in the semi-darkness, "And I'll be damned if anybody else dies on my watch."

"Thank you Eddie." Cortana patted his shoulder as she walked passed him, "You are a sweetheart no matter what the Master Chief and Roland says."

Eddie shook his head, "I'm not a sweetheart. I'm from Brooklyn."

"Still," Cortana said, and gave him a final wave as she walked down the edge of the plateau. She spotted Roland and Jake, the gunslinger slowly checking each round chambered in his blue steeled revolver, and Jake examining an M9 pistol. He tucked the pistol into the waistband of his jeans on his left side, the ruger safely in its holster on his right. He took a kunai out of his pocket, and twirled it around with his finger in the metal loop. Roland holstered his revolver and examined a kunai himself, running a thumb over his sharpened edge.

He looked at Cortana, "Do you have experience with these?"

"Do you?" Cortana asked. Fifty meters away a crow gave its morning caw and flew close to the ground. The gunslinger threw the kunai and the weapon snatched the bird midflight out of the air, the blade slicing off its head.

He pulled out another kunai and said, "It will work."

Cortana raised an eyebrow, "Is there any weapon you are not a natural with?"

"No." His eyes wandered to the quasi-sunrise, "We need to move before we lose the dark." He slid the kunai into his gun belt and slipped away soundlessly.

Cortana walked up to Jake and placed both hands on his shoulders, "Promise me you will be safe, alright."

"I will," Jake said. Cortana hugged him briefly, placing a cheek on top of his blonde head. When the embrace was over they too snuck noiselessly towards the prison.

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The scope of the M90 scanned the blue rooftops of the prison compound, Eddie making sure that he trained his eyes away from where the Master Chief had set the C4, lest his eyesight suffer from looking directly at the explosions. The lids of his green eyes closed and he reached deep into his subconscious to retrieve the only picture of Susannah he had, his mental picture of her. Already it had begun to fade, the internal photograph already marred by dirty fingerprints and creases on the corners. Yet it was still there, and although Eddie knew that someday he would lose that picture, for now he hung on to it. He did more than hold it, he super glued it to the roof of his mind and thumb tacked it for good measure. Slowly he opened only his right eye and once again looked down the scope of the rifle. Aim with the eye, shoot with the mind, he closed his eye and looked at Susannah's picture again, kill with the heart. _

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The Jackal paced back and forth across the top of the wooden watchtower, his eyes far less than observant and his mind only on when his shift was going to end. He wondered briefly as to how he had gotten into this position, working underneath a human that was. There were about a hundred others of his kind at Algul Siento, and while they all may have entertained the thought of cooperating with humans on a limited scale, none of them would have suspected that they would ever actually be taking orders from one. Of course, the Jackal continued to think, it could be worse. If it was not for the matriarch's decision to throw their lot in with The Crimson King, he would likely be dead of the same mysterious disease that had ravaged their home planet. The Grunts were in the same boat as well, refugees who escaped the destruction of their world and thrown into one where the Brutes would actually bow to humans and take their commands. Certain humans at least, humans that served the interests of the great Red King who had promised the three dozen or so Brutes here that to bring down the beams would have the same effect as activating the Halo's, bringing salvation to all. The Jackal guessed that he would have liked to have been there when The Crimson King told the Brutes this, as it would have taken the influence of a god to make them accept the current situation they were in. And perhaps The Crimson King was a god, the Jackal thought, one could never tell.

Moving around to begin his pacing again the Jackals sensitive hears picked up a low whooshing sound, followed quickly by another. He scanned the area outside of the prison in front of him, finding nothing. He looked back at the other two watchtowers on his right to see if the other sentries had picked up on that strange noise as well, but when his eyes fell on them he saw that the other two Jackal sentries were gone. Alarmed the Jackal scanned the area in front of him again, wondering if it would be prudent to activate the alarm and wake the entire prison. If it was a false alarm a Brute would likely tear him limb from limb, but if it was notâ€|

He did not hear the whooshing sound of his own death as the blade buried deep into his throat, spilling his alien blood over the roof of the watchtower. He grabbed at his throat, attempting to breath but only able to make a gurgling noise, the blood bubbling out of his mouth. He fell backwards and distantly heard the sound of explosions. The last thought he had as he laid there dying was if the weapon stuck in his throat (a strange thought indeed considering he had never seen such a weapon before) was called a shuriken or a kunai.

56. Chapter 56

Chapter 56: The Assault on Algul Siento

Pimli Prentiss rushed out of his private quarters, a small cottage sized dwelling on what had use to be the eastern side of the prison compound. He roughly pulled his pants the rest of the way up, having been caught in the middle of his morning constitution, and drew his M9 pistol. He preferred the projectile weapon over the plasma pistols and carbines that the Covenant Unggoy, Kig-Yar, and most of the can-toi and taheen wore. Mostly he preferred it because he felt the alien weapons looked too much like toys for his liking, and because

the Jiralhanae spike rifles weighed far too much for any normal human to use. As another explosion shook the ground around him, sending the entire ammo depot up in a mushroom shaped ball of fire; Prentiss hoped that his old service weapon would be enough. He saw his second in command, the taheen Finli with the head of a weasel, run up to him, quickly putting a closed fist to his forehead.

"Sai, the entire compound is under attack." At Finli's words another series of explosions went off, this time concentrated around the entire perimeter, and Prentiss could see a large portion of the razor wire fence shooting up into the air, riding an intense wave of fire and heat.

"I can see that for myself. Go get Daedalus and tell him to prepare his Jiralhanae for a counter attack," Prentiss said, attempting to keep his voice as calm as possible. It certainly did not help that many of the can-toi and Unggoy were running around him like chickens with their heads cut off.

Finli's furry weasel cheeks began to twitch, "Counter attack where?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we get there. For right now just go find that big ape and put a boot in his ass," Prentiss said. No sooner was the word ass out of his mouth that Finli's head disintegrated into a thick cloud of pink mist as a 50 caliber round tore through his skull. Prentiss cursed loudly, his calm demeanor almost completely gone, and he quickly took cover behind the building that served as Algul Siento's mess hall, the Breakers themselves having just begun breakfast before the attack started. Pressing his body flat up against the wall, doing his best to ignore the Unggoy being ripped to shreds by the 50 caliber rifle fire coming somewhere from what use to be north, he heard the sound of gunfire. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, the sharp cracks and pops of rifles and pistols filling his ears with terrifying vibrations. He heard something else as well, something he initially mistook for a cannon.

The reports of the blue steeled revolvers was louder than any gun he had ever heard in his life, loud enough to momentarily drown out the other noises of battle around him. As he stood there with his back pressed up against the wall, his legs threatening to shake uncontrollably, he thought, _Christ. They are coming at us from all directions at once. There must be an entire army of them. _He took in a deep breath, steeling his mind for the sprint he would have to make over open ground in order to link up with the Jiralhanae, and took the first step out of cover. Before he could take the second, iron vice grips clamped down under his chin and on the back of his head. He felt his head being jerked violently, the snapping of his neck sending brief but intense shockwaves of pain throughout his body. Then feeling nothing, his body slumped to the ground. The last thing he saw before death took him was a pair large metal boots carrying some sort of armored clad demon further into the prison.

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Arbitrary East

The Master Chief stepped around the body of Pimli Prentiss, not

bothering to look down or give a second thought to the man he had just killed. The Spartan's mind was elsewhere as he leveled the great revolver at a squad of Unggoy that were running on their stubby legs towards him. Their eyes widened visibly as they saw the Master Chief and the Grunts raised their plasma pistols, one of the bolts impacting his shields and making the air around him shimmer a golden yellow. John took his time, picking each shot out as he fired the hard caliber, thumb and forefinger working in unison. The four Grunts each fell in turn, their chest cavities caved in by the hot lead slung at them. A pair of spike rounds flew over his helmet and the Master Chief tucked and rolled, several more rounds impacting the place where he had stood half a second previously. Four Brutes were standing forty meters away from him, their spike rifles raised, and as John finished the roll he moved his left hand to fan the hammer back on the revolver, quickly firing two shots at the pack. The two lead brutes fell, bullet holes directly in-between their eyes, part of their skulls on the back of their heads flying off as the bullets exited.

Deep mournful howls exited the throats of the two remaining Brutes and the Master Chief dove right quickly as another salvo of spikes raced towards him. His armored shoulder impacted the wall of the building next him and he crashed through the middle boards. John felt a tug of pain from his arthritic hip as it impacted the floor, but quickly filed it away into the inner recesses of his mind as he looked up. The interior of the building was spacious, long plastic benches filled with hundreds of humans, Breakers, with lunch trays sitting in front of them. Many of them had been standing up, no doubt to try and look out the window to see what was causing all the noise, but now all eyes were on the Master Chief. A plasma round charred the floor next to him and John rolled over, standing up as another bolt licked the ground by his feet. He ran towards the source of the incoming fire, the perpetrator a low man with a stained white apron standing behind the cafeteria counter, scrambled eggs, bacon, and pancakes cloaking him in steam. John shields drained to zero as he took a fully charged blast from the plasma pistol, and he lunged over the counter at the low man, crushing him beneath his half ton of armor. Sharp cracks told the Master Chief that the low man's ribs had been broken and he saw blood ooze out of the creature's mouth and eyes sockets.

The Spartan got on one knee and reloaded the revolver with a blinding flash of gauntleted fingers as he waited for his shields to recharge. He stood fully upright and saw that almost all of the Breakers and crammed themselves into the far side of the mess hall, all of them wide eyed with fear at this walking behemoth. Their looks of fear turned into a full blown panic as the two Brutes from outside crashed into the interior of the building, creating two new holes in the wall. John drew the hard caliber and fired the first Brute flying off of his feet and nearly crashing into the second. The Master Chief slid over the counter and landed on his feet, raising the revolver again to fire at the remaining Brute. The spike rifle that the Brute carried was flung at him, and the Master Chief ducked quickly to avoid the spinning blades on the tip of the weapon. When he looked up he saw that the Brute was nearly on him in full berserker mode, and John holstered the revolver and prepared to unsheathe his combat knife. Just as the Brute drew back its fist to pummel him, the alien stopped. The Brute grabbed the side of its head, blood spurting out of its nose in thick torrents, before collapsing onto its back. As the legs of the Brute twitched in violent spasms, John scanned the

room. His eyes fell on Ted Brautigan, the old man standing in the middle of the mess hall leaning heavily on one of the lunch tables.

He smiled at John and said, "Second time in my life I have done that. You owe me."

The Master Chief nodded at him, "Make sure the rest of the Breakers stay here. Do not go outside for any reason." Ted, still breathing heavily, gave John a wave and watched as the Spartan swiftly left the mess hall.

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The Plateau

Eddie smiled as he saw the head of the weasel taheen explode into a million pieces. He adjusted his aim towards the human whom he was sure was the brains behind the operation, but the man ducked behind cover before Eddie could land his sights on him. His smile broaden, however, as he saw the Master Chief working his way over to where the warden had hidden, and he shifted the crosshairs of the scope towards the middle of the prison. Squinting slightly he made out a Brute, larger than the rest, barking out orders to at least two dozen other Brutes standing in a half circle around him. He resisted the urge to shake his head at the sheer stupidity of what the alien was doing. Instead he decided to paraphrase a line from that old science fiction movie starring Charlton Heston with a little bit of Jaws thrown in for good measure. "Smile you damn dirty ape," Eddie gently squeezed the trigger, the butt of the rifle slamming into his shoulder from the recoil. The round impacted the Brutes throat, spraying its blood into the face of the creature next to him. Eddie ejected the spent round, rode the bolt forward and fired again.

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Arbitrary North

The two pistols in his hands clicked empty and Jake ducked behind a pile of wooden crates. From the sweet aroma wafting from the wooden boxes Jake guessed that they were filled with fresh fruit, and wondered briefly on how the prison was able to get such fresh supplies. Two clips slammed home into each of the pistols and Jake stood up again, his sky blue eyes scanning the street in front of him. He dodged to the left as the two Brutes standing on the opposite end of the street fired their weapons at him, one spike grazing his arm and ripping through his tan shirt. He ignored the bleeding and while lying on his side fired the two pistols at the first Brute.

Bullets impacted the side of the Brutes head, one digging deep into its eyes socket, and it eventually took six of them to bring the creature down. The other Brute had closed the distance in the time it took for the first one to die, and Jake did a backwards summersault, landing neatly on his feet, and standing up. The Brute ducked its head as he charged at Jake, the bullets that the boy slung at him burying themselves into the creature's thick hide. Jake sidestepped quickly to his right to avoid the incoming beast, but suffered a glancing blow from the Brutes shoulder and was knocked off his feet. The Brute spun around and raised the spike rifle over its head, ready

to impale the boy with the razor sharp bayonets. The blades stopped midswing on their path towards Jake's chest and seemed to bounce off an invisible barrier. Stunned, the Brute swung the spike rifle back again but Jake thrust out his hand and the giant alien was propelled backwards in the pile of crates. Ripe oranges, bananas, and apples began to bury the Brute, and the creature had just started to come back to its senses when something cold and metallic was thrust into its mouth. Jake squeezed the trigger and the fruit was painted in dark red blood.

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Arbitrary West

The gunslinger flattened his back against the side of one of the Breakers dormitories. Green plasma fire filled the air where he had just stood, six Jackals with their shields overlapping blocking the street in front of him that led to the center of the prison. Phalanx formation, Roland thought while reloading his revolver. Volley fire as well. He had seen both battlefield techniques employed during his long life in mid-world, and knew the secret to beating both. He closed his eyes and focused on the rhythm of the volley, the Jackals using the technique to keep up a steady stream of suppressing fire and to avoid their plasma pistols from overheating. There was a half a second gap between when the last Jackal on the right fired, and when the one on the farthest left resumed firing.

The gunslinger waited until that weakness presented itself before he turned the corner, standing in the middle of the street as a perfect target with his feet spread apart. The familiar sense of time slowing to a meager crawl filled him as his right hand fanned the hammer of the blue steeled revolver, a single plasma bolt almost stopping in mid air as the chambers of the gun emptied. Each bullet found the gap in the shields that the Jackals' used to fire their plasma weapons, six limbs torn from the avian like bodies that carried them. The shields vanished as all six Jackals screeched in unison, rolling on the ground and holding the stumps of their arms as they slowly bled to death. Roland turned sideways just as time found its purchase upon reality again and the green plasma bolt sailed past him.

The two Brutes that had been behind the Jackal's phalanx raised their weapons, and the gunslinger quickly chambered two rounds and slung one at the Brute on the right, smashing his face in with the force of the impact. The second Brute may have had a better chance at killing Roland if it had held on to its senses after seeing its pack mate die, and deep down the gunslinger felt a pang of regret that it had not. Instead Roland frowned as the beast seemed to descend into a rage and charged blindly at him, forgetting all about the weapon that it held in its hand. Tossing the revolver into the air Roland caught the weapon on the end of its muzzle. He sidestepped and the Brute charged past him like a bull. He swung the butt of the revolver down as the Brute went past, and heard a dull thud as it impacted the beast's head. The Brute swung around on its feet, dazed and its vision blurry. The last thing it saw was the flash of the gunslinger's revolver.

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Arbitrary South

White light engulfed Cortana as her hands wrapped around the fists of the Brute in front of her, the Jiralhanae roaring in surprise at the strength the human female exhibited. Blood red symbols danced around her body and the Brute pressed further, causing Cortana to slide backwards. An electric blue eye winked at him and the Brute tilted its head in confusion. She clenched her hands tighter on the Brutes fists and arcs of white electricity shot from her body, invading every single nerve and neuron in the alien's body. He shook, his thick fur singeing as his body was cooked from the inside out. He continued to twitch even as his heart exploded in his chest and his brain burned black. Cortana let go of the beast which easily stood two and a half feet taller than her and the Brute fell backwards. Bodies of low-men, taheen, Grunts, and Jackals trailed behind her all the way to where she had breached the perimeter of the prison. This had been the first Brute Cortana had encountered since entering the prison which made her worry. That meant that the others had concentrated their efforts on fighting Roland, John, and Jake. Cortana unslung her M14 rifle and slapped in a fresh clip, the action ridding forward with a satisfying click as she ran towards the middle of the prison.

The guards had set up the standard blue deployable cover, the plasma based shields growing red as bullets ricocheted off them. Just as John had planned the remaining guards had fallen back to the middle of the prison, the deployable shields spread out in a wide circle. The remaining Brutes clung to the cover, pushing any Grunt, Jackal, low man, or taheen that tried to take cover with them away. Those that were pushed into the middle were quickly cut down by Eddie's sniper fire, the 50 caliber rounds acting like miniature artillery as the bodies of the guards were shredded, limbs littering the ground and headless bodies lying face up, some of them with their legs still jerking wildly. Two taheen ran out of one of the buildings and Cortana brought up the M14, the rounds passing clean through their bodies as she put two bullets in each of them. There was a small rise in the street that led to the center of the prison and Cortana got into the prone position behind it, spikes and plasma rounds passing harmlessly above her head. She scanned the area in front of her, looking for the others. The barricades blocked her view of Jake and Roland, but she could hear fire coming in from their directions.

She turned right and caught a grey blur rushing into the middle of the barricades. John leapt over the deployable cover, firing the revolver as he jumped and destroying the skulls and brains of six Brutes. He holstered the long gun and drew his combat knife, using both hands in a downward power stroke on the nearest Brute, causing blood to splatter against his shields and make them shimmer. Cortana watched as the remainder of the guards turned their attention to the Spartan and she took her chance. The flickering flame of White covered her again and she stood up, slinging the rifle over her shoulder. Her hands closed into fists and the aura that surrounded her expanded outward, showering the interior of the prison in a miniature sun. The deployable covers failed instantly as the White light impacted them, and John had to shield his eyes to avoid being blinded, and the Brute he was currently fighting howled in pain as his eyes burned from the light's intensity. The constant gun and plasma fire stopped for several seconds as the light that emanated from Cortana consumed all. In one last flash of brilliance the light vanished and Cortana who had been floating a few inches in the air fell forward, wincing in pain as her knees scraped against the stone street.

This time only gunfire resumed the remainder of the guards blinded and in the open. The Master Chief ran through them with blinding speed, slashing the knife outward into the throats of any being he got close to. Jake and Roland removed themselves from cover and walked steadily towards the center of the prison, the muzzles of their guns hot, pausing only to reload. Cortana raised her M14 and joined the slaughter.

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John thrust the knife straight up into the chin of the last remaining Brute, the tip of the blade implanting itself in the alien's brain cavity. He withdrew the blade and stepped sideways to allow the Brute to fall forward. Cortana reslung her M14, the wood stock pressing uncomfortably in her back and walked to the center of the prison. Trying to avoid walking on the bodies of the dead guards was nearly impossible, and she took her time moving towards John to avoid tripping over one. Jake was with Roland now, the gunslinger inspecting a deep cut on his arm, but the boy gave a broad smile at Cortana as she walked past. She returned it and thought, _We did it. We won, and this time nobody had to die. _

As she turned back to John though, who was busy reloading the revolver, she saw a Brute claw its way upward through a pile of corpses and attempt to lung at her Spartan. John, sensing the danger, spun around on his heel and brought the revolver up. Before he could fire however, the report of a rifle sounded in the distance and the Brute was struck down by the 50 caliber round with a large bullet hole neatly in its left eye. John turned around and nodded in the direction of Eddie, and Cortana could imagine him waving back at her Spartan. Breathing a sigh of relief Cortana closed the remaining distance between them. John holstered the revolver and brought his hands up to remove his helmet, tucking it under his arm once it was off.

Cortana raised an eyebrow, "Do you need to readjust it?"

John shook his head, "No." Then he smiled at her. A genuine smile and Cortana could see that not only did his teeth show when he did, all of them perfectly straight, but that his crooked grin made him look ten years younger than he actually was.

She smiled back, joy flooding her senses. _He's changed. He has actually changed. _She came to him, hesitant at first, and then wrapped her arms around his middle. Cortana expected him to stiffen at the public display of affection but instead he put his free hand around her and squeezed gently. The armor was cold and hard, but Cortana could care less. They had won, John had changed, and nobody else had died. Cortana looked up at him, planning on seeing if he would go so far as to kiss her in front of the others, but what she saw frightened her. John's first genuine smile was gone, and she could make out the hairs standing up on the back of his neck. He pushed her away and Cortana flung backwards in the air. As she fell into the mass of bodies beneath her, Cortana saw John twirl around and draw the blue steeled revolver.

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Eddie set the butt of the M90 rifle on the ground in front of him and

rubbed his face with this right hand. He could not help but smile, almost felt the urge to laugh. He had seen everything through the scope of the sniper rifle, had seen the entire assault unfold in the span of half an hour, although it had felt longer. In a firefight every second is stretched as far as it can go, and that fact is especially true in mid-world. The laughter finally came, something he thought he would never genuinely do again since Susannah's death. It had not just been a victory, it had been a downright massacre, and for the first time he believed that all of them could make it out of this mess in one piece. His laughter was cut short by the report of one of the blue steeled revolvers, the sound reverberating against Eddie's psyche. With blinding motion Eddie grabbed the rifle and looked down the scope, searching frantically for where the shot had come from. At last he found it.

"No," Eddie said. His hand left the trigger and he slammed the fist into the ground next to him. "God damn it no."

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The Brute laid there bleeding from a chest wound and propped up against the body of its fellow pack mate, its spiker raised towards John. The top of its skull had been blown apart by the bullet John shot him with. The spike rifle and the arm that held it dropped to the ground, and Cortana's eyes looked back at her Spartan. The revolver in his hand was still smoking, the hand holding it shaking. His helmet was hanging loosely from his fingertips until finally it fell to the ground, the helmet rolling over so that its golden visor faced Cortana. She could see blood dripping onto the ground, coming from a wound somewhere on his face.

"John?" she asked her voice weak and small. The revolver dropped to his side, and John turned around to face her. Cortana's world froze as if in the grip of a midwinter blizzard. A round from the Brute's spike rifle was imbedded deep in the socket of his right eye, blood pouring out onto his face. He took one staggering step towards her, and then fell backwards onto the mass of bodies beneath him.

57. Chapter 57

Chapter 57: John 117

He fell in slow motion, time having evaporated before Cortana's eyes. Her body refused to move, the brain itself having frozen at what it had just perceived, and he lay there for several moments with his lifeless body twisted at an unnatural angle on top of two Jackals, a Brute corpse propping up his feet. A dagger entered Cortana's mind and she reacted, getting onto her feet and stumbling the first few steps as she ran to him.

"John," she said, picking up her Spartan's head in her hands. The spike that had entered his right eye, which was now little more than a pool of blood, had disintegrated. His left eye was closed and his head hung limply in her hands. She shook his head as if attempting to wake him, "John!" His head lolled in her hands over to the left, displaying the deep gaping wound for all the worlds to see. Cortana put two fingers to his neck and felt for a pulse, her own heart racing when she did not feel his pumping. The heavy sound of Roland's boots thudded behind her, followed quickly by the softer sounds of

Jake's footsteps. She turned to them, "Help me. He's not breathing. We need to do CPR or he'll die."

"Cortana," the gunslinger looked as if he was about to reach out his hand to put it on her shoulder, but pulled his arm back at the last moment. Jake was standing next to him, motionless, his face drained of color as he looked at John's body on the ground. Roland looked at John's wound, and shook his head at what he saw. "It's too deep. There is nothing we can do for him."

Her electric blue eyes flashed their brilliance at the gunslinger, and for the first time in ages he felt the urge to step backwards, "You don't know him. You don't know what he is capable of." Cortana turned her attention back to John, closing her eyes as she put her hands a few inches above his chest plate. A small jolt of electricity jumped from her hands into John, and his body jerked at the sudden surge, his armored legs kicking the head of the Brute underneath him further into the ground. His remaining light blue eye flew open and he began coughing, blood coming up from his mouth. Cortana took John's head back into her hands, cradling it.

The coughing subsided and his light blue eye found hers, "Cortana?"

"Don't talk," She said. "We need to get the armor off of you. I'm sure at least one of those Breakers used to be a doctor. Jake, go ask around and try to find one. Roland I need you to help me with the emergency release on his chestâ€¦"

John cut her off, the words coming slowly and slightly slurred, "Cortana, stop." She looked at him, and the fear that had dug into her eyes buried itself deeper as she saw him reach for the chain of his dog tags around his neck.

She grabbed his right arm, attempting to pull it back, "Don't you dare. You are going to be fine. I will take care of you."

"No," John said, breathing the word more than saying it. His fingers wrapped themselves around the chain and he pulled them from his neck. He groped for Cortana's hand, eventually finding it, and placed the dog tags in them. The muscles in his face strained as he brought his free hand up, the other still clinging tightly to Cortana's, and he put the flat of his palm against her cheek, "It's okay." The hand holding hers fell uselessly to the side, the dog tags staying in her hand as her fingers wrapped around them. His face strained again as he turned his head to the side, "Roland?"

"Here," Roland said, and John's remaining eye flicked upward to meet his.

"You promised me," John said. His voice was weak, barely audible, but Roland heard every word. "Don't break it." He turned his head back to Cortana, the hand still held against her cheek now wet with tears. John struggled with what he said next, his voice becoming more slurred as he went, but he fought to annunciate every word spoken, "Cortana, Buck's dog tags and Callahan's rosary. They are in the bunker." He swallowed hard, and each breath he took required every bit of his mental will. "You need to carry them for me."

Cortana shook her head, the tears flowing freely now, "No, you are

going to carry them. You are going to get better. You always get better no matter how badly you're hurt."

"I died once," John said. His hand moved to the back of her head, "But I got to see you again because of it." His eye closed and his breathing nearly slowed to a stop. The light blue eye flung open and he coughed again, more blood seeping from his mouth. His eyebrows furrowed and he forced out the next words, "But I'm not coming back this time. I'm sorry."

"You don't know that John, so don't say it like you do," Cortana said. John pressed down on the back of her head, and brought Cortana's lips to his. She kissed him, tasting the blood that he had coughed up when she did, but still Cortana pulled back from the kiss reluctantly when he released the pressure. John grunted as he lifted his head up and brought his mouth to her ear, and whispered something to her. What he said I cannot tell you, because honestly I do not know. His head thudded on the ground when he was finished.

Cortana shook her head and placed her forehead on his, her tears dripping onto his skin and beading up like sweat. "Don't go," she whispered to him. "I still need you."

"No, I needed you," John said. She sat there with her forehead pressed to his, Roland and Jake standing uselessly beside her, and listened as his breathing slowed, and then finally stopped.

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Eddie ignored the burning in his lungs, the heavy anti material rifle thudding against his back where he slung it and the uncomfortable pull of the M9 in the waist band of his jeans as he ran towards the center of the prison. _The Master Chief's tough, as tough as Roland. There is no way he can die from a cheap shot like that. No way. _ He continued to chant the words no way in his mind as he ran, but his stride faltered, his feet stopping numbly in the middle of the stone road as he saw the rest of the ka-tet. Jake and Roland stood their motionlessly, and the look the gunslinger wore was one that Eddie had never seen on his face. He struggled to find the right word to describe it. _Helpless. He feels helpless because there is nothing he can do. _Eddie had long ago realized that Roland had a habit of pulling miracles out of nowhere, but as he studied the strange emotion on the gunslinger's face Eddie felt all the hope he had built up drain from his chest. Hope left completely as he saw Cortana straddling the Master Chief's lifeless body, her head pressed up against his, John's dog tags dangling from her fingers.

A voice spoke up from behind him, "What the hell is going on?" Eddie turned around and saw thirty Breakers standing behind him, the man who had spoken to him a red head with freckles dotting his face. The man, who looked like he was in his mid twenties, spoke again, "Holy crap. Is that guy going to be okay?"

"Shut up," Eddie said. "Get the fuck back inside. All of you."

The look the man gave him enraged Eddie further. It was the look of indignation laced with entitlement, "Look buddy I don't know who or what you guys are, but you can't just order us aroundâ€|" The man stopped mid-sentence as Eddie pulled his pistol, leveling it straight

at the man's head.

"Give me a reason," Eddie said. The man took a step backwards, holding his hands in front of him. The other Breakers began to step back as well as Eddie continued talking, "That man died to free you ungrateful fucks. And you have the balls to say that I can't order you around." He thumbed the hammer back on the pistol, "Get back inside."

"Eddie." It was the voice of Ted Brautigan. Ted turned to Dinky who was standing beside him and said, "Get these people back inside."

Dinky shook his head, "Got it." He moved in front of the group of Breakers, blocking Eddie's aim. "Come on people; let's give these guys some space." Most of the Breakers began to walk away at Dinky's words, some giving a backwards glance at Eddie. The red-haired man still stood there motionless. "Hey are you deaf. I said we need to give them some space."

The man turned to Dinky, his face blank and pale, "Did you feel his mind? He was going to kill me. He was actually going to kill me."

Dinky nodded, "All the more reason why you need to get back inside." He waved his hand in the direction the other Breakers had gone, "Move, and tell the others to stay inside until things cool down." The man took a few steps backwards, and then broke out into a half jog as he went to catch up with the other Breakers.

Eddie lowered his pistol and ignored the look that Ted was giving him. Ted turned his attention to the middle of the town and his eyes began to flicker. When they stopped he staggered a few steps and said, "My God." He shook his head, "Poor thing."

"What?" Eddie asked. He looked back into the center of the prison. Cortana now had her arms wrapped around Jake's middle, the boy still wearing the expression of shock, and Roland still standing their hopeless. She was weeping openly now, and a single thought ran through Eddie's mind over and over again, _It's my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault. It's my fault._

"Cortana is pregnant," Ted said. Eddie's head snapped to look at him. The old man looked at the ground and shook his head, "John is the father." Eddie's grip tightened around the pistol and he began pacing back and forth, furious at himself, furious at Roland for not being able to do anything, and furious at Ted for just standing there with his head hanging, looking just as lost as Eddie felt. He stopped next to one of the buildings, propping his back up against it. He slid down into a sitting position, and he began to pull at his hair.

58. Chapter 58

Chapter 58: Goodbyes

Cortana leaned her head against her arm as she bent over the toilet, the remnants of the breakfast she had forced herself to eat now floating in the bowl. She barely felt the cool tile beneath her, or

the cold porcelain of the toilet against her skin. As she sat there on the floor of the bathroom in one of the Breakers' dormitories in the early morning, she felt her eyes grow heavy due to the lack of sleep from the night before, and closed them attempting unsuccessfully to block out all thought. The night itself had seemed to last for days, and perhaps it had. For the first time since ka had bestowed her with a human body after her digital death, Cortana laid in a bed without John beside her. She had laid there on a bed that was much too big for her liking, fully aware of the vacant space next to her. Staring up at the ceiling, Cortana had waited in vain for dawn to come. It never did, the seconds marching by with deliberate slowness, so she took several pillows and put them up against her body in order to give the illusion that someone was sleeping next to her. That he was sleeping next to her. When sleep did come it had been short, and restless. In her dreams the familiar vision of The Dark Tower came, the force within it, the tangible will of ka calling her towards it and unlike when she had woken up from this dream in the bunker John was not there to calm her.

Her eyes opened slowly as she heard a knock on the bathroom door, and Ted's voice seeped through its cracks, "Cortana, are you okay in there?"

"I'm fine," Cortana said, reaching up to flush the toilet. Of course it was a lie, and Ted knew it was a lie, would have known it even if he was not psychic. Everyone who asked her how she was doing knew her response was a lie, and Cortana felt a brief spike of anger as she wondered why they bothered to ask at all. She washed her hands quickly, checking her face in the mirror for any telltale signs of her most recent bout of morning sickness. _No_, Cortana thought. _I can't be sure of that yet. _Without thinking her hand went to her stomach, _I can't be pregnant without him here to help me.

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"Cortana?" Ted's voice came through the door again.

"One minute," Cortana shouted back, her voice snapping unintentionally. The eyes that looked back at her through the mirror were red and puffy around her electric blue pupils, dark bags underneath them. She took a deep breath, turned around and opened the door. Ted was standing just outside, and Cortana winced mentally as she saw his shoulders sag as he looked at her.

"Ginger helps," he said. "If you are having morning sickness."

Cortana shook her head, "I don't know for sure if that's what it is yet." She glared at him, unable to help herself, "And I would appreciate it if you would not read my mind. Jake at the very least is courteous enough not to do that, even if he can't always control it."

Ted sighed but did not take his eyes off of her, "Even if I had not read your mind, I would still have recognized the signs. I've been around a long time you know." He pointed at his white hair, "And I also know that wishing for something not to be true doesn't make it any less true."

Cortana shook her head and looked away, "Why did you come here?"

"Other than to check up on you?" Ted asked, and Cortana nodded. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a large wad of green dollar bills. Looking down Cortana saw that most of them were fives and ones, and as Ted fanned the wad out she saw the occasional twenty. "Took up a collection among the Breakers for your trip to New York. Most of them only had what was stuffed into their pockets when they were brought here so it's not much, but enough to get you started at least."

He handed the wad over, all one-hundred and twenty-three dollars, and Cortana took it gently. "Thank you," she mumbled. "What will you and the other Breakers do once we leave?"

"Some of us, myself and Dinky included, are going to try and make it to the Calla. The others," he paused, hesitant. "The others are staying here."

"Staying here?" Cortana asked, feeling her face flush with heat. "After everything we've done for them. After John gave his life to free them they are staying here?"

"Cortana you have to understand. There is no guarantee that those of us who are leaving are going to make it to the Calla. There is hardly any fresh water out there, little to no food except for what we bring with us, and no way to tell how far we are going."

"They can try," Cortana said, her voice breaking and nearly coming to a shout. "That is the least they can do, the very least. He died for them, and they don't even care. They would have been just as happy if we had never come, and they just got to sit here playing video games and watching movies while The Crimson King used them to destroy everything." She pointed her finger at his chest, "And don't tell me that's not true. They don't care that John died. They don't care that the greatest man and soldier I've ever known fought to try and save them. They don't care." She stopped then, catching her breath and forcing the tears to stay behind the dam of emotion that Cortana had shoddily erected just so that she could function."

Ted shook his head, "Some of them don't, I won't lie to you there, but a lot of them do Cortana. A lot more than you might think."

"I'm sorry if I can't fully believe that," Cortana said. She walked past him, not looking at Ted's face. As she reached the end of the hall and the door that led to the outside she forced herself to stop and turn around, "I know that you care Ted. You and Dinky. Just make sure that when you get to the Calla you try to make sure that everything we did here was worth it."

Ted nodded, "You have my word on that."

Cortana turned around and put her hand on the doorknob, "I'll take your advice on the ginger, see if that helps."

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She sat on her knees beside his grave which was situated in the middle of a small garden in between two of the dormitories, less than two hundred meters from where he had died. Small groups of Breakers walked past the garden, many of them quickening their steps when the

saw her kneeling there. They had used one of the anti gravity carts that the Unggoy used to haul supplies that were too heavy for them to carry to move John's body and his armor to the sight. Cortana had dug the grave herself; Roland, Eddie, and Jake helping her despite Cortana's protests. When they were finished Cortana had placed the M14 at the head of the grave with the numbers 117 carved into the butt of the rifle. John's dog tags were held loosely in her right hand and she talked to him.

"Roland and I are going to New York by ourselves. Eddie and Jake are going to try and find a working train and take it to Fedic where we'll meet them later. I'm pretty sure they used the train tracks to bring supplies to the prison so it's a good plan. You would have liked it." She paused, looking down at the freshly dug up Earth while rubbing her thumb over the dog tags, "I think you would have liked it here. Buried on the same battlefield you died on." She gave a weak smile, "What more could a Spartan want?" Cortana was silent for a long time, a multitude of thoughts clouding her mind. She settled on one and began talking again, "We are going to do what we talked about in Fedic, go see the writer. I'm going to open up a portal to December 18th 2012. That will give us a day to check in on the Tet Corporation. Hopefully everything worked out like you planned with them. Maybe they will even have a file on the writer. If not I'm not sure how we are ever going to find him." She shook her head, "I don't know what I'm going to do after that. If I am pregnant I don't know what I'm going to do, where I'm going to go, how I'm supposed to raise our child without you." She closed her eyes and her free hand grabbed a handful of dirt underneath her, "You were wrong John. I do still need you. Everything I had ever planned was for us. I might have been smarter, but you were always so confident, so sure that everything was going to work out, even if I knew for a fact it wasn't. You always had trouble expressing your emotions, but in some ways you were more hopeful than me. You made me believe things, promises you made, even when logic told me you were wrong, and even when you couldn't keep your promises I still believed in you because you never gave up." Cortana opened her eyes and she looked at the numbers she had carefully carved with his combat knife on the rifle, "I miss you."

Cortana turned around as she heard footsteps behind her, and saw Eddie walking up to her. "Came to say goodbye," Eddie said. She nodded and turned back to the makeshift grave marker. Eddie stood there, unsure of what to do, until finally he forced the first words that came to his mind out of his mouth, "I'm sorry. He's dead because of me. I was the one that took my eye off the scope after I said I would watch your backs."

Cortana shook her head, not turning around to look at him, "It's not your fault. We all thought we had won, even Roland and John. If anyone is to blame it's me. He took his helmet off because of me, because I wanted him to act like a human, not a machine."

She felt Eddie's hand grip her shoulder and she looked up at him, "Don't you ever blame yourself. Do you really think the big guy would have wanted you to do that?"

"No," Cortana said, turning away from him. "But it doesn't change the fact that it is still my fault."

Eddie sighed and got on to one knee beside her, "Are you still sure

about not putting his name on there?"

"Yes. It's what he would have wanted."

Eddie nodded and unslung the backpack that was on his back. He reached in and pulled out the small metal tin containing Susannah's ashes, handing it to Cortana, "When you go to New York, do me a favor and spread those around the vacant lot where the Rose is. I think Susannah would have liked that."

Cortana wrapped her fingers around the tin, taking it from him, "I will. I think I will put John's dog tags there too. Callahan's rosary and Buck's dog tags there as well. I think they would have all liked that."

Eddie nodded, "Yeah they would have. That guy Buck looked a little like me, and if I had dog tags I'd want them to be put there too."

"Do you think he will come back?" Cortana asked and Eddie turned his head to look at her. "Jake came back to life twice. If anyone else could do that it would be John."

"It's not like Jake decided to come back. There is no choice to it. Jake came back because ka still had something for him to do, just like ka brought you, John, and Callahan back to life because you three still had something to do. Unfinished business."

"And you don't think John has unfinished business?" Cortana asked, anger seeping into her voice. "You don't think that we still need him, that I don't need him."

Eddie shook his head, "I'm not saying that. I just think that whatever ka wanted John to do he has already done it." Cortana closed her eyes and put a hand on her stomach. Now it was still flat, but soon that would change. Next to John coming back, Cortana's biggest hope was that she was not pregnant, that she would not have to go through that alone. She opened her eyes again when Eddie continued speaking, "We won though. He won. I just wish John had lived long enough to enjoy it."

"Won?" Cortana asked. She shook her head, "The people of the Calla won. The Breakers we freed won, but us? We always lose. Soldiers always lose."

59. Chapter 59

Chapter 59: Halo 4

"Be careful," Cortana said to Jake as she hugged him. John Chambers, a possible ancestor of the Master Chief, a boy who was considered by the enemy to be hyper lethal at the age of twelve, Cortana's gunslinger, looked up at her.

"I will. I'm not a kid you know," he said.

Cortana gave him a small smile. "I know Jake. I just don't want to lose anyone else, especially you,"

"You won't lose anyone, I promise," Jake said.

Cortana's electric blue eyes stared into Jake's sky blue ones. They were not the exact color and hue as John's light blue eyes, but his voice, the confidence in it, reminded her of the Master Chief. The twin emotions of happiness and grief rammed against one another inside Cortana's chest as she looked at her gunslinger, and she thought about what Eddie had said, about how ka brought them back in order to accomplish something. She thought that maybe Jake and her had been brought back to take care of each other once John was gone, but then of course another thought came. If that was true, then ka had planned for John to die all along.

Cortana nodded her head towards Roland who was standing behind them, a satchel containing the twin blue steeled revolvers, the Horn of Gilead, the money from the Breakers, the dog tags, the rosary, and Susannah's ashes slung around his shoulder. As always he appeared slightly disinterested, although now Cortana suspected he only looked that way in order to hide his true emotions. "Hasn't Roland taught you anything about woman?"

Jake glanced back at Roland and shook his head, "Not really, unless you count the birds and the bees stuff."

Cortana's mind flicked for just a moment to the horrible thought of Roland explaining to Jake how the process of procreation worked, and resolved that she would give an undoubtedly more informed lecture on the subject to the boy once she and Roland got back. Her thoughts quickly switched back to the situation at hand and she said, "The first thing you should know is to never make a girl a promise that you can't keep."

"But I can keep this promise," Jake said. "I'm not going to do anything stupid."

"No," Roland said, and Jake turned to look at him. "You won't. Listen to Eddie, Jake. He is dinh while I am gone."

Jake nodded his head, "Yes sai."

All three of them were standing just outside the prison next to the broken and twisted train tracks, of which only one line was serviceable and ran from Fedic all the way the Devar Tete Whye which bordered the Calla. It was perhaps noon, the clouds just above them having turned from the constant gray to an off white as the sun passed over them. Above the train tracks the Beam, which next to the Rose was the only remaining support holding up The Dark Tower, flowed like a river with the swirling and murky clouds that followed its path marking out its current. If the Tet Corporation had managed to keep the Rose safe, then with the Breakers freed at Algul Siento, The Crimson King had essentially lost. All that was left for the ka-tet to do was to bring about the King's final defeat and then march to The Dark Tower and whatever fate awaited them there. Of course somewhere along the way they would have to kill Mordred and there was still the problem of their actions having only delayed The Dark Tower's fall rather than prevent it completely. A solution would have to be found before they reached it, and Cortana knew that she would have to break the hold that the Tower held on her, the irrational desire to see it even if it meant her death. In total there was still much to do, and time had abandoned them, had gone off on holiday and

only occasional came back to remind them that it was still there, but only just barely.

All these thoughts ran through Cortana's mind in a fraction of an instant as Jake turned around to look back at her. She smiled, something that she only seemed to be able to do around him today, and kissed him on top of his head. "Hurry up to the train station before Eddie decides to leave you."

"He won't leave me," Jake said. "He would just start up the train and make me run to get on."

"I can see him doing that," Cortana said. She gave him one last hug and watched the boy's back fade into the distance as he ran down the tracks towards the ruined station.

"Are you ready?" Roland asked. Cortana looked up at him, her eyes moving to area around his nose, still unable to look into those light blue eyes that reminded her so much of John.

Cortana nodded, "Yes. I trust you are not going to shoot the first thing you see once we get there."

"Only if it shoots first," the gunslinger said. He pulled out a red handkerchief from around his neck and handed it to her, "For the nose bleed."

Cortana's eyes moved to the handkerchief then back up to Roland, her eyes still not meeting his. _What did John make you promise Roland? _she thought, and took it from him. "Thanks." Stuffing it into her pocket, Cortana closed her eyes and focused on the crisp cold day in the New York of December 18th 2012.

â€|

10:18 A.M., December 18th, 2012 (Gregorian Calendar) New York, New York

Her feet touched softly on the ground as they went through the portal, Cortana's hand which held the red handkerchief quickly coming up to wipe the blood that was dripping from her nose. There was a pop and Roland landed beside her, looking very much like a man from another world. The people that walked past them on the sidewalk just in front of them barely registered their sudden arrival. A few glanced up at them, and one or two actually cocked an eyebrow at these strange newcomers, but most kept their heads down, noses buried deep in smart phones. Cortana had planned for them to appear just opposite of where the vacant lot was, but as she peered through the thick New York crowd her heart momentarily stopped. There, where the vacant lot had once been, was a fifty story jet black building. However, when she read the words in bold white capital letters just above the half dozen double doors that led into the building's main lobby, her heart resumed beating again.

TET CORPORATION

DARK TOWER BUILDING

Next to the company's name was the logo of a white rose, and underneath in much smaller white letters were the words 'Providing

Quality Dental Care Since 1977'.

"They put a building right on top of the Rose," Cortana said, and Roland looked at her. "Of course, what better way to protect the Rose then to put it right in the middle of your company's headquarters?"

The gunslinger turned his head from her and stared upward at the skyscraper, "They seem to have done well."

"Yes," Cortana said, staring up at the skyscraper as well. It was not as tall as The Dark Tower was in her dreams which seemed to have no definite height to it. Nor was it the tallest building in New York during this time period, and it was completely dwarfed by the structures the UNSC had been capable of building. There was nothing impressive about it architecturally, the black box shaped design reminiscent of the monolith in 2001 A Space Odyssey, yet as Cortana looked at the building she could not help but feel impressed, if not moved. Here for the first time she was able to see tangible proof that everything the Ka-tet of the Nineteen had sacrificed, what John had sacrificed, was not in vain. There was a rumble in her midsection and Cortana's hand, as it seemed to do often now, went to her stomach.

Roland glanced at her, hearing the rumble as well, "Did you not eat?"

"I did. I'm just hungry again," Cortana said. Only it was more than just hunger, it was a craving, and she did not just want food, she wanted something specific. Something cheesy, and preferably salty. She looked around behind her and saw that they had appeared in front of a convenience store which sat next to a drug store. "Roland I need money." Roland raised his eyebrow at her, but handed her the satchel without question. Cortana dug into it, her hand brushing up against one of the gun belts, and she pulled out three crumpled up one dollar bills. She handed the satchel back to Roland, "Stay here, I'll only be a few minutes." Without waiting for a response Cortana opened up the door to the convenience store, the bell jingling merrily as she did, and Roland watched her walk away. His own feelings about her rushed up inside him, but he managed to push them down before they reached his chest. The gunslinger's eyes wandered from the convenience store to the drug store next door. He stared through the window at the bottles displayed on the shelves for several moments before deciding to walk in.

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Cortana walked quickly down the aisle, her memory working overtime as she searched through the all the possible snacks made during this time period that could possibly fit what she was craving. _No, not craving, _Cortana thought. _I'm just hungry. I threw up this morning because I have a stomach virus and now I'm just hungry. _In the back of her mind she knew this was not true, but she clung to the hope that she did not have to carry John's child alone nonetheless. The pinwheel of her memory landed on something specific, her craving for it intensifying as she realized what it was, and her pace quickened towards the chips section. _Doritos. Nacho Doritos. Just a normal, not pregnant craving that everyone has. _Ignoring the whisper in the back of her mind that was calling her a liar, Cortana reached for the first bag she saw, but her hand pulled away almost immediately at

what she saw on the front of the bag of chips, or more specifically who she saw. On the bag in the lower left hand corner was a picture of John in his MIJOLNIR armor. Cortana stared at it, her mouth opening and closing several times, until her eyes drifted to the words written underneath.

HALO 4

EVERY BAG GETS MEGA (XP)

A man suddenly bumped into her, knocking Cortana momentarily off balance. He held out a hand and propped her up, "Sorry about that. You okay?"

Cortana looked up at him. He was wearing a brown collared shirt with kaki's that matched his deep brown eyes, looking no older than twenty-five. She nodded, "I'm fine, just surprised me that's all."

The man nodded back, but tilted his head as he continued to look at her, "I know this may sound weird, but do I know you from somewhere?"

Cortana's eyes darted quickly to the bag of Doritos she had gone to grab only moments before, and then back to him. Hoping that he did not notice Cortana shook her head, "No, you must have me confused with someone else."

The man scratched his head, "Are you sure? Because you look pretty familiar, I just can't place where I've seen you before." He looked at her for a few more seconds and then shook his head, "It will probably come to me after I walk out of here." He reached over without looking and grabbed a bag of Doritos, "Sorry again about bumping into you." Cortana looked at him as he walked down the aisle, and then quickly snatched one of the bags of nacho chips off the shelf.

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As Cortana went out of the store her eyes scanned the crowd quickly, becoming increasingly distressed at the looks people were giving her as they walked by. A spark of recognition seemed to pass over the eyes of a few of them, but much like the man in the convenience store they did not seem to make the mental connection, even the ones that were holding bottles of Mountain Dew with the Halo 4 logo plastered on the side. It certainly did not help that the man behind the counter of the convenience store had winked at her when she went to pay for the chips and asked her if he had seen her before on T.V., and it defiantly did not help that a commercial featuring both her and the Master Chief prominently had appeared on the T.V. mounted on the wall behind the counter right when he asked the question. Luckily the T.V. had been placed on mute. Her electric blue eyes at last found Roland, the gunslinger standing in the middle of the sidewalk oblivious to the fact that people had to go out of their way to move around him. He was holding two plastic bags in his hands, but Cortana barely registered them as she walked towards him, "We need to get off the street, now."

Roland's mouth twitched into a frown, "Why?"

"Because," Cortana said, holding up the Doritos bag to him. She lowered her voice to a whisper, "John and I are from a video game. I have already been recognized at least twice."

Roland tilted his head, "A video game?"

"It's too complicated to explain to you now. It will be easier to show you later. All you need to know is that this is bad. There are advertisements and commercials for us everywhere, pictures of me everywhere. Thisâ€¦" She looked back down at the bag, "Halo, appropriate name I guess, but from what I've seen it's really popular. It's only a matter of time before someone sees me and makes the connection."

The gunslinger sighed and looked at the Dark Tower building across the street, "We go in there as planned. They already know about us and the stories we come from." He looked back at Cortana who had pulled the bag of chips open and was busy stuffing them into her mouth, and raised both eyebrows.

Cortana glared back at him, "I told you I was hungry." She put another chips unceremoniously in her mouth.

The gunslinger shook his head and reached inside one of the plastic bags, pulling out a large bottle labeled Ginger Pills, "I spoke to the woman at the apothecaryâ€¦"

"Drug store," Cortana said through a mouth full of chips. "It's called a drug store."

Roland shrugged, "She said these pills should help with the sickness." He reached in the other bag and pulled out a cardboard box, and Cortana's eyes widened as she read the words Home Pregnancy Test. "She also said to get this." His light blue eyes moved over to her, "What is this exactly."

"I'll explain later, although I think you can guess what it is for," Cortana said. She finished the last chip in the bag. Folding it up neatly with John's picture facing outward Cortana placed it in the left front pocket of her jeans. Cortana reached out and took the bags from Roland, placing the pill bottle and the pregnancy test back inside them. She noticed that he was still looking at her and she looked back, this time attempting to look into those light blue eyes, but still Cortana found that she had to look away, "Thank you. I honestly thought you didn't care."

"Why would I not care?" Roland asked. She allowed herself to look into his eyes for a second, but no more than that, and found to her surprise that he looked genuinely hurt, although the rest of his face did not show it. "I made a promise to John, and I intend to keep it."

"What did you promise him Roland?" Cortana asked. The gunslinger turned away from her, not answering. He stepped determinately through the crowd, ignoring the people who bumped into him and leveled curses as a result. As he began to cross the street towards the Tet Corporation building, Cortana stopping right on the edge of the curb, a yellow taxi came speeding towards him. Roland held out his hand towards the taxi, not bothering to look at it, and the driver slammed on his breaks. The car stopped just inches from the gunslinger's hip,

and the driver opened the door, yelling enough obscenities at him to make a marine blush. Roland gave him one look, the driver getting a full view of his cold blue eyes, and the man stopped cursing almost instantly before slinking back inside the safety of his yellow taxi. Cortana looked left and right, making sure there was no traffic coming, before darting across the street herself.

60. Chapter 60

Chapter 60: Legacy

****A/N** Got snowed out of work today (bad news for me, good news for you). New chapter is up early so please enjoy. ******

One of the set of black double doors slid open automatically as Roland and Cortana approached them, the gunslinger pausing a moment as they did, almost looking reluctant to enter. Cortana glanced over at him, for the first time fully understanding how truly out of his element Roland was. He came from a world where technology had failed and almost all scientific knowledge had been lost. In Cortana's opinion, it also did not help that the gunslinger, much like John, was almost completely without an imagination. He believed in magic, but only in the way that we believe in electricity. Magic simply was, and in Roland's mind there was no need to question further. Cortana herself did not believe in magic, or to put it more correctly was resisting the inevitable conclusion that magic existed, but at this point as she stood next to Roland in front of the wide open double doors Cortana was willing to admit that since arriving in mid-world she had encountered natural forces for which there was no conventional explanations.

Roland's eyes flicked over to Cortana and then back at the door, waves of heat from inside the building rolling over them. "I know it is a machine," he said.

"I never thought you were stupid Roland, just not creative," Cortana said. In her mind she paused for a moment. It was the tone of her voice that caused her to pause. It was almost friendly, the remark not meant to be taken as an insult but rather as simple banter. This was the first time Cortana had ever been alone for an extended period of time with Roland, and already she found that they were slipping into similar relationship that her and John had had prior to the Battle of Installation 04. Not exactly friends, not yet, but partners who were exceptionally compatible, more compatible than Cortana had thought she would be with Roland. Later she would think that this should not have been that surprising, considering Roland was so much like John. Yet it was because he was so much like the man she loved that caused Cortana to feel a certain amount of hatred for the gunslinger deep in her center.

Roland nodded, unaware of the internal war of emotions going on inside Cortana's mind, "Good." The black automatic doors had opened and closed several times at this point, and the people inside were beginning to stare. Without ceremony he walked in, Cortana making a good effort to match his long strides. Their walk into the building was cut short as Cortana stopped Roland by grabbing his shoulder. The gunslinger raised an eyebrow at her and Cortana motioned discreetly with her head at the long line ahead. Roland looked, seeing several people put their baggage into a long conveyer belt which fed them

into a long box shaped machine which was manned by a man dressed in dark blue (Roland frowned when he saw that the man was wearing a gun). The people would then pass through a metal arch, which occasionally beeped with red lights. When it did, another 'man of the watch' as Roland thought of them would swipe a short metal wand over their bodies.

"Metal detectors," Cortana whispered as low as possible. "Do you know what they are?"

"Vaguely," Roland said. "I remember Eddie had to go through one when we first met." He kept his voice low and did not look at Cortana as he spoke, mentally counting the number of security guards were in the building, and how many bullets he had left for his revolver. "Will you be able to get my guns through?"

"Other than walking up and telling them who we are, no. The metal detector that checks the baggage and the one that we have to walk through probably run off the same system, but it's no guarantee that they are not independent of one another. If they are then I would have to touch both at the same time, which won't be easy to do without looking suspicious," Cortana said. She was also not looking at Roland. Instead she noticed with increasing, although not yet overwhelming, alarm that one of the guards was looking at them, or more specifically at her. He recognizes me, Cortana thought. As the guard looked away, picking up the phone next to him and methodically punching in numbers, Cortana felt her body loosen, not having realized how tense she had become.

Next to her Roland continued the conversation seemingly unperturbed by the security guard's look, although certainly not unaware of it, "Can you not do it from here?"

Cortana bit the inside of her cheek, "I have never accessed a system without physically touching it before, but I'll try." She was about to close her eyes when the security guard that had been looking at her hung up the phone and began walking towards them. "Rolandâ€¦"

"I see," the gunslinger said, his left hand drifting to the opening of the satchel, one of the revolvers sitting comfortably near the top. Cortana was about to grab Roland's arm to prevent him from doing something rash when the security guard, a dark black man with a clean shaven head and soft brown eyes, smiled at them.

"Mr. Deschain?" the man asked.

Roland's eyes looked the man over slowly, pausing momentarily at the gun he wore. He nodded slowly, "Aye."

The man nodded his head back, arms clasped behind him and far away from the grip of his pistol, "We were told to expect you and Mrs.â€¦" he used John's last name, his real last name, and Cortana felt the force of gravity increase on her jaw. The security guard looked behind him at the line in front of the metal detectors, having increased by ten people since Cortana and Roland had entered the building. "VIP's do not have to go through the security checkpoint. If you like I can escort you around."

Cortana forced herself to overcome the irrational fear that opening her mouth would allow her jaw to succumb fully to the force that was

pulling it downward and said, although shakily, "Please." She barely noticed the looks of envy, and the few looks of recognition, the people in line gave her as the guard led them around the check point, weaving in and out of the maze of velvet blood red rope with practiced precision. It was only after he stopped that Cortana was shaken out of her train of deep thought.

"A company representative will be with you shortly to escort you further. Have a pleasant day Mr. Deschain and Mrsâ€¦". He used John's last name again, and Cortana was once again driven back into her own thoughts. After the guard had moved past them to resume his post, Cortana began walking forward again, her eyes fixed firmly on the white tiled floor of the lobby. This time it was Roland's turn to grab her shoulder, and for the first time she noticed what was in the middle of the lobby, the impossible mirage having been mostly hidden from sight by the crowd of people at the entrance.

Cortana could not believe what she was seeing. Her eyes had first been drawn to the Rose, a single wild flower growing in a small garden in the middle of the Dark Tower lobby. Sunlight shined in through the windows, casting the rose in pale yellow, mimicking the small sun that was held within its nineteen perfectly formed petals which were now closed. When her eyes drifted upwards, however, she momentarily forgot all about the Rose, and the infinity of infinities held within. Behind the Rose, on a grand pedestal, stood two statues cast in white marble. The first statue was of the man standing next to her, looking up at the monument with a similar sense of awe in his light blue eyes, though not on his face. The gunslinger, Roland Deschain, stood as a monolith cast in stone, one of the great revolvers held firmly in his left hand. Beside him was the figure of a man several inches taller, the other hand held in his right. Cortana stared at the statue of John outside of his MJOLNIR armor, momentarily speechless. Her eyes drifted downward and she noticed an epigraph etched into the marble pedestal in bold black letters.

****ERECTED IN MEMORY OF THE ELD FAMILY AND ALL THEIR
DECENDANTS****

"Cortana," Roland asked, his voice wheels away in her mind. "Can you see it?"

"Yes," Cortana answered. She turned to him, "How can you read it?"

"It is in the High Speech," Roland said, giving her a puzzled look. "Is it not the same for you?"

"No, for me it is in English," Cortana said.

A female voice spoke up from behind them, Cortana and Roland turning simultaneously towards the speaker, "It is in both. The words change to the native language of whoever reads it." The woman who stood before them now was in her early forties, hair wrapped tightly into a bun, and brilliant green eyes whose beauty made her appear at least a full decade younger than she actually was. Nancy Deepneau nodded back towards the statues, "Keep looking." Cortana turned around, and to her astonishment the words that had been written on the monument had disappeared like fading ink. A new epigraph bled from the stone, the words first appearing as faded as an old tattoo, but eventually

growing bolder and more pronounced. When they fully appeared Cortana read them.

****ERECTED IN MEMORY OF THE GUNSLINGERS OF GILEAD, THE SPARTANS OF THE UNITED NATIONS SPACE COMMAND, AND THE KA-TET OF THE NINETEEN****

****DONALD CALLAHAN****

****SUSANNAH DEAN****

****JOHN 117****

Cortana's chest felt like it was constricting, and she had to blink several times to keep her eyes from watering. She turned back to Nancy who smiled at her, her teeth a pearly white, "Hile Roland and Cortana. We have been waiting a long time for you."

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The elevator appeared as any of the other ones arranged in a wide hallway in the center of the building, with the exception of the out of order sign placed in front of its doors. When Nancy pushed the up button, however, the doors slid open soundlessly. The inside of the elevator was typical, even plain looking, but as immaculately clean as the rest of the man floor had been. Nancy stepped in first, waiting momentarily for Cortana and Roland to join her, before pressing a button that caused the doors to close. She took a silver key, it's smooth silver surface acting like a mirror and distorting Cortana's face into something that only vaguely resembled a human being. The key was placed into a lock just below the emergency stop switch, and with the flick of her wrist Nancy turned it. She pressed the buttons four, five, and ten simultaneously and the elevator began to ascend upwards, the only hint that they were moving at all coming from the brief sense of inertia.

Cortana broke the silence, it having become thicker than fog in the morning air, "How did you know we were coming?"

"Psychics," Nancy said, turning around to face them. "We have a few hundred of them on the payroll in New Mexico. It is not an exact science, but it helps us see into other realities and allows us to run operations against Sombra and North Central."

"Operations?" Roland asked. "You can travel to other worlds?"

Nancy nodded, her posture remaining perfect as she stood in front of the two walk-ins, "New York in particular is full of portals to other realities, most of which were left behind by the Old People of mid-world. Most of the late seventies and early eighties were spent fighting the King's men over control of them, and once we had enough secured we started studying them, eventually creating our own." She looked at Cortana, and there was a look in her eye's that Cortana had seen before only she had only ever seen in directed at the Master Chief, "The first doorway we created was to your world, a month after the dark man had released the virus."

"Is the UNSC still standing?" Cortana asked, snatching at the question.

Nancy's perfect posture faltered briefly, gray lines that betrayed her true age flickering over the top of her brow, "We were able to find someone who was immune to the virus, but we were unable to come up with a vaccine. The disease itself is different from anything we have ever encountered, and we could not risk more missions in order to retrieve more immune subjects. The UNSC collapsed within two months of the outbreak, and by three months over ninety-nine percent of the population was gone." She hesitated, as if she planned on adding more, but seemed to decide against it. "I'm sorry."

Cortana closed her eyes, breathing in deeply. She opened them and met Nancy's green with her electric blue, bolts of lightning flashing over an open meadow, "Thank you, for the monument." Nancy's eyes blinked rapidly, giving a look of surprise. Cortana continued, "Everything that me and John fought for is gone. Every sacrifice, every pyrrhic victory, everyone who gave up their lives for humanity in our world; all of it was in vain because we didn't realize there was a much larger war going on around us. But you remembered." She looked over at Roland, "You remembered both of our stories, and the people we fought to protect."

Nancy shook her head, "There are millions who know your story Cortana."

"No," Cortana said. "Playing video games and reading books is not the same, because for them it is all just entertainment, just fantasy. None of them will ever know that all of it really happened, that we are real, just as real as them." She gave Nancy a small smile, "But you know." The elevator stopped abruptly, the dial above the doors indicating that they were on floor nineteen. Cortana was about to move towards the doors, waiting for them to open, when the wall behind her slid open, revealing a long hallway inside.

"A few more twists and turns to go," Nancy said. "But I'll see if Delta can take us on a more direct route to the Agent's staging area. We are running a standard artifact recovery operation, and I was hoping you would like to observe."

"And after that?" Roland asked, pausing just outside of the hallway.

Nancy gave an amused sigh, "After that we will give you what you came for. Our file on the writer."

Cortana felt a shock run through her fingers, "You know who he is?" Nancy nodded her head.

"More importantly," Roland said, his deadpan voice contrasting sharply with the multitude of emotions held within Cortana's, "Do you believe he is part of our ka-tet?"

"Yes, almost without a doubt," Nancy said. "It will become clearer once I give you the file, but there are certain anomalies, coincidences that are not really coincidences, that make us believe he is, among other things."

"For example?" Roland asked, still not moving out of the elevator.

"That his full name adds up to nineteen letters once you add the

suffix Jr. That his first and last name is the same as one of the writers of the Halo books."

"There is more than one?" Cortana asked.

"There are several," Nancy replied. "Halo is more of a collaborative effort, while the Dark Tower series was written solely by Stephen King. The writer's last name is spelled differently, but it is pronounced exactly the same as Joseph Staten."

_Joseph, _Cortana thought. Finally, after all this time, she had a name. _Joseph son of Joseph. Why would he write a story combining the works of Stephen King with Halo? Why would anybody do that? What is the sense in it?_ "Is that the name he writes under?" Cortana asked.

Nancy seemed to hesitate again, almost reluctant to give the answer, and Cortana wondered why that was. "He goes by a pseudonym of sorts. Cor Tenebrae."

In her head Cortana gave a small chuckle, _Latin. Well now I know that somebody thinks they are clever, and that they are a fan of Joseph Conrad. _

61. Chapter 61

Chapter 61: Agent 1588

The door to the fifth and final elevator opened on subbasement E3, a floor in the Dark Tower building that did not technically exist. This elevator, like the two that came before it, required an access code (the numbers of which always added up to nineteen), voice recognition, and retinal scan. The room that the elevator opened up on was a small observation deck. As Cortana, Roland, and Nancy Deepneau walked into the room towards the one way mirror that allowed observers to look out, but prevented anyone from the staging area to look in, a deeply synthetic voice spoke out from one of the speakers mounted on the wall.

"Good morning Ms. Deepneau."

"Morning Delta," Nancy said, taking her place in front of the one way mirror with her hands clasped firmly behind her back. "What is the status of the operation?"

"Agent 1588's squad is moving in on the target, but there have been some complications."

"Complications?" Nancy asked, looking up at the camera mounted on the wall next to the speaker that was pointed towards her, its lidless eye observing and recording everything that transpired within the command center. Cortana walked up beside Nancy to look out at the staging area, and not for the first time that day she questioned if what she was seeing was actually real. The room below them was a miniature of the Spartan IV's staging area on the UNSC Infinity, yet despite only being a third the size it still manage to capture the cavernous essence of it's not so fictional inspiration. Long rows of armor assemblies were spread out along each wall, which along with the floor and ceiling was a brilliant white, illuminating all but the

most stubborn of shadows. Fixed in the center of the room, held in place by four mechanical arms placed on each corner, was a steel door. Currently the door was open on its hinges, and beyond the doorway Cortana could see a cloud of thick mist, swirling like steam from a boiling pot, but little else besides the occasional glimpse of movement. Roland came and stood beside her, and when his arm accidentally brushed up against Cortana's shoulder she unconsciously moved a few inches away from him. Roland's jaw tightened but he made not comment, seeming to be content on watching the small army of technicians move about the room, bulky but functional data pads held nearly up to their noses. If Cortana had bothered to look at his eyes she would have seen the same hurt expression that they held when she told the gunslinger that she thought he did not care.

Beside Cortana Nancy continued speaking, "Show me. Put it up on monitor one." One of the black monitors turned on above the observation window, and Cortana had to step back several feet in order to look at it. Again she questioned if what she was seeing was real. The video feed was from a helmet cam, the words 'Agent 1588' in the lower left hand corner. As when she looked through the steel doorway all Cortana could see was the rolling mist, the fog nearly having the consistency of a tangible object, but what she could see, what she could see very well, was that Agent 1588 was using a Heads Up Display vaguely similar to that deployed by UNSC Spartans and ODSs. The only real difference was that in the upper right hand corner below the weapon's layout was a bar, currently yellow and only filled halfway, labeled power.

"What is the situation?" Nancy asked Delta, her eyes taking in every small detail, what little details there were, from the video feed.

"It seems that the American Government in this world was experimenting with extra dimensional travel. A doorway was opened onto a reality with an entirely different ecosystem than ours."

"And once the doorway was opened they could not figure out a way to close it," Nancy said.

"Yes,"

Nancy glanced at the steel doorway beyond the observation deck, and then back at the monitor, "Has there been any attempt to breach our doorway?"

"None as of yet, but there is a response team on standby."

Nancy nodded, "Good, but if anything tries to come through shut the doorway immediately."

"Understood. I will relay that information to Agent 1588 and the rest of his squad."

Suddenly a gauntleted arm was thrown up in front of the screen. The Agent put two fingers together and motioned forward. The mist had thinned, and Cortana could see a narrow gravel driveway with a car parked next to a large white two story house, a fallen tree having crashed through one of the second story windows. From the left and right side three figures clad in MJOLNIR armor moved forward, assault rifles raised, their metal boots making soft crunches on the gravel.

The assault rifles themselves were similar to that deployed by the UNSC, but lacked the sleek design, the inferior metal forming harsh ridges and corners.

"Spartans," Cortana said, turning to Nancy. "You created Spartans."

Nancy shook her head, her green eyes still not wavering from the monitor, "Trust me, we are not as presumptuous as the IVs were. We prefer to call them Agents."

"How?" Cortana asked, her eyes darting from Nancy, to the monitor, and back to the staging area. "All this technology is centuries ahead of what you could accomplish on your own."

"We had a little help from Dr. Halsey," Nancy said. "We pulled her from your world just before she was to be executed, and she has been working for us ever since."

"Dr. Halsey is here?" Cortana asked, and Nancy shook her head. Cortana's mouth went dry, a thousand emotions flooding her system, her part biological part AI brain unable to choose which one she wanted to feel. On one level she experienced a certain amount of joy to know that she was not the last living remnant of the UNSC, but then again it was Dr. Halsey and Cortana had long ago become disillusioned with her methods. She was the one responsible for creating the Spartans, and had broken nearly every law in the UNSC to do it although not without receiving the proper sanction to do so, something most people in the UNSC hierarchy chose to conveniently forget once the Human Covenant War had ended. Yet immoral or not, necessary or not, the lesser of two evils or not, Halsey had hurt her Spartan, had broken him and the rest of the Spartan candidates in order to create perfect soldiers. That was something Cortana was not sure she was ready to forgive, notwithstanding what Halsey had done to Cortana herself. A part of Cortana knew that John's death was not Halsey's fault, at least not directly, but—She made him into what he is, Cortana thought. Made it to where fighting was the only thing he knew how to do, and he died fighting. _

"Halsey," Roland said, addressing Cortana. "The one that trained the gunslingers of your world."

Cortana shook her head, "She ran the Spartan II Project, and is the one most responsible for their creation, but it was Chief Petty Officer Mendez that actually trained them."

"And she is the one that created you?" Roland asked.

"Yes," Cortana said, unable to hide the bitterness in her voice.

Nancy finally tore her eyes off the screen and looked at Cortana, "Halsey wants to speak with you. She has been waiting a long time for the chance to see you again."

Cortana bit her lip and her eyes went to the plastic bag containing the ginger pills and pregnancy test in her hand, "She can wait one more day then. There is something I need to check first."

Nancy's eyes went to the bag, the thick plastic concealing its

contents, before going back to the screen, "Whether or not you see her at all is entirely up to you, but I think you should."

"I will," Cortana said, looking at the screen as well. The Agents had moved into the house, the mist inside substantially less thick but still present. They moved up the stairs to the second floor in single file, assault rifles at the ready, the floor boards bending to their breaking point under the weight.

A shadow shifted in the far corner of the upstairs hallway, and a gruff but young voice shouted through the monitor's speakers, "Contact!" The shadow lurched forward on eight legs, it's part spider, part scorpion form scuttling across the floor. The creature was the size of a Great Dane, and if the fangs inside its mucus fill mouth were any indication it was far more ferocious. The creature leapt at the agents, rising a meter into the air, and was met with a wall of led, thick puss oozing out of the bullet holes as the monster fell to ground. The static flapping of insect wings buzzed through the speakers, and several more creatures vaguely similar to a house fly but the size of a large cat flew over the Agents' helmets. They continued to fire, wings and guts dropping onto the wooden floor around them. As the last creature was killed Cortana heard Agent 1588's voice again, "One clear." The other Agents responded.

"Two clear."

"Three clear."

"Four clear."

"Move out, second bedroom on the left." The Agent paused and Cortana could imagine him looking at his HUD. "Suit only has power for one more hour. Let's pick up the pace." The four armored clad figures moved swiftly two the bedroom, the door of which had been left open. They stacked in front of the door on top of one another, assault rifles pointed at the ground. The first Agent tapped the thigh of the one behind him, who in turn tapped the Agent behind him. The wave went down the line, and when it came back to the Agent at the door he moved into the bedroom, the others following closely behind him and fanning out into the corners, rifles working on a swivel as they scanned the interior of the room. Agent 1588's HUD landed on a painting propped up on an easel in front of the window facing the grey world outside, and beside her Cortana felt Roland's muscle's tense. "Artifact secured. Agents 983 and 1456 cover our exit, Agents 1634 and 1492 secure the painting."

"Nancy," Cortana asked. "What is this?" The man depicted in the painting stood in front of a ghost wood door. The man wore a hat similar to a modified cattleman, a poncho that had been opened up in the front, two ammunition belts strapped across his chest, a leather gun belt fastened around his hip, and the great revolvers, Excalibur, held in each hand. The artist had only hinted at the man's features, but Cortana would have recognized him anywhere. To the left of the gunslinger the artist had painted a blood red rose, and to the right was The Dark Tower, the sands of the Mohaine Desert underneath the gunslinger's weather worn boots.

"An artifact," Nancy said simply, taking her eyes off the screen.

"A painting of me," Roland said, his light blue eyes taking in as

much of the portrait as he could. "How many of these have you collected?"

"Hundreds, and not just paintings either. We are trying to collect as much as we can from worlds we deem at risk," Nancy said, once again folding her arms behind her back and resuming her near perfect posture. "The story of the Ka-tet of the Nineteen has been told for thousands of years, across more realities than we can count. The vast majority of artists and writers do not even realize they are telling your story, but it all comes back to nineteen."

"Everything comes back to nineteen," Cortana said, looking at the image of the portrait on the screen again. "Nineteen is the truth."

Nancy nodded, "From the Bible, to English fairy tales, to Robert Browning, to Steven King, to Bungie, to Rooster Teeth, to Yeats, to William Shakespeare, to Edgar Allen Poe, to Akira Kurosawa, to Marvel Comics, to J.K. Rowling, to Masashi Kishimoto, to T.S. Eliot, to Sergio Leone. From the Flood and the Ark to the Battle of Jericho Hill. Thousands of them across the expanse of existence all telling your story, because your story is the apotheosis of all stories."

"And Joseph, Cor Tenebrae, he is one of them," Cortana said.

"One of many yes," Nancy said, the worry lines on her face appearing again.

"But he is the one responsible for putting it all together," Cortana said. "He is the one that is causing everything to happen." In her mind she added, _He is the one that caused John to be killed. _

"Not necessarily," Nancy said, her worry lines deepening. "He is only writing it."

"If he writes it then he creates it," Cortana insistent, perhaps too fervently. "That makes him responsible."

"Ka," Roland said. "The writer is bound by ka just as we are. He may write, but that does not mean he creates. He may only be doing what the White is telling him to do."

"We already know he can change things in the story by accident," Cortana said, shooting the gunslinger a glare that would make most men wince. "Logically that means he can change things on purpose as well. He has free will."

Roland shook his head, "No one is above ka. No one."

62. Chapter 62

Chapter 62: No Take Backs

Thirty-two days. That was how long Cortana had spent with John in her physical body. If she took into account the way mid-world's time flow seemed to speed up and slow down then she had actually spent closer to forty-five days with him. Still, only forty-five days. Forty-five days when she was able to touch him, to smell him, to see him with

eyes that were truly hers. To be able to do all the things with him that she had only daydreamed about when she was still a pure AI. Forty-five days, and now she would never be able to do those things with him again.

â€|

Subbasement E3 of the Dark Tower Building contained five fully furnished studio apartments, along with the staging area, observation deck, armory, Dr. Halsey's lab and office, medical bay, and firing range. They had been built in preparation for the ka-tet's return, and it did not take even the smallest fraction of Cortana's vast intellect for her to infer that two of the apartments were meant for Susannah and Eddie, and her and John. The apartment was small, about twice the size of a standard motel room, but it was certainly luxurious compared to what Cortana had grown use to. The queen size bed was far too big for her liking, bigger than the guest bed at the Jaffords' house in the Calla which had only been a double, and Cortana spent several moments dividing the bed in half with the numerous pillows she had been provided. There was a large forty inch flat screen T.V. mounted on the wall opposite the bed, the walls themselves having been painted a faded light blue, and a DVD player underneath. The T.V. itself was on a swivel, and could be turned to face the love seat couch on the wall to the left of the bed, and without realizing it Cortana had smiled at the thought of seeing John try to sit in it. There was no kitchen in the apartment, no need for it, and the rest of the empty space only served to remind her of how alone she felt. Reminded her of how much she missed seeing John's massive figure take up any extra space.

Beside the door to the apartment, to the right of the bed, was a book case, and reading the titles of the books was one of the first things Cortana did when she came into the room. On the first row of the bookcase was Stephen King's Dark Tower series. The Gunslinger, The Drawing of the Three, The Wastelands, Wizard and Glass, Wolves of the Calla, Song of Susannah, The Dark Tower, and Wind Through the Keyhole. Cortana's hand went briefly to the seventh book in the series, The Dark Tower, but she pulled it back just before her fingers made contact. A voice had spoken up, a voice she had heard only in her dreams, and it was so soft that Cortana wondered if she had heard it at all. It was the voice of the White.

(No. Not yet)

On the bottom row of the bookcase was the Halo series of books. The Fall of Reach, The Flood, First Strike, Ghosts of Onyx, Contact Harvest, The Cole Protocol, Evolutions, Glasslands, The Thursday War, and Cryptum. Her eyes had first gone to Contact Harvest, and she saw with no real surprise that the novel had been written by the author with the same name as Cor Tenebrae. Joseph Staten. _But the last name is spelled differently, _Cortana had thought. This time she reached out and grabbed the Halo novel titled The Flood, and spent a few minutes reading the first ten pages, taking the time to soak in every word. There was no migraines, no sensation of reality itself being torn down around her as Cortana had experienced when she first tried to read one of the Halo books. This was either a product of her metastability, or the work of a much larger and more convoluted force. She flipped through several more pages and got to the part she was looking for. Cortana readâ€|

'Cortana looked at the Chief. "Sleep well?"

"Yes," he replied. "No thanks to your driving."

Cortana smiled. "So you did miss me."'

Like her counterpart in the novel, and again without realizing it, Cortana smiled. She closed the book and put it neatly back on the shelf. Reaching back behind her on the bed Cortana grabbed the plastic bag, and pulled out the box containing the home pregnancy test. Her thumbs ran across its smooth surface, and although she already knew what to do, Cortana still flipped the box over and read the directions thoroughly. There was no room for mistakes here, not for something as important as this, not when she was praying to whatever force was listening to her that she could disprove what her heart knew to be true. She flipped the box back over and slowly opened it.

â€|

I do not know how long she sat there on the cold porcelain toilet, her blue jeans around her ankles and her head in her hands, one of the pregnancy tests sticking out in between two of her fingers. What I do know is that she was there long enough for her thighs to start going numb, that she had used four of the pregnancy tests, that they all came back with a pink plus sign, and that she was crying. Cortana was crying, thin streams of salty tears running down her cheeks, because she had wanted this. More than anything, more than perhaps her irrational desire to see The Dark Tower, she had wanted John's child, and once he had died she would have given anything to take it back. Would have made any deal necessary, would have been happy if John had never changed, if he was unable to return her affections, would have taken back the three times they had made love if it meant that he would somehow turn out not to be dead. If she could somehow turn back the clock and make it so he would have never taken off his helmet. Turn back the clock and make it so he had never loved her. If Cortana could do that then John would never have died. Those were irrational thoughts, illogical at best, but knowing that they were did not stop Cortana from thinking them. So when she saw the fourth and final pink plus sign, she began to cry.

From outside the bathroom Cortana heard the door to the apartment open. The hinges did not squeak, had barely been used at all with the exception of the janitors that came in to clean once a week, and if it were not for the dull thud the door made against the rubber stop on the wall Cortana would never have heard it open. Quickly she threw the home pregnancy tests into the trashcan, put the box for it in the cabinet underneath the sink, and grabbed several wads of thick toilet paper. She quickly wiped the tears from her face and dabbed both eyes, before throwing the wad on top of the pregnancy tests in the trashcan. A temporary solution, but there was hardly a more permanent one available in such a short amount of time. She reached back and flushed the toilet, and before the water was done swirling around the bowl Cortana was turning the knob on the door. On the other side was Nancy, still in her women's business attire and a thick manila folder in her left hand. Her right hand was raised into a fist preparing to knock, and Nancy took a half step back in surprise as Cortana opened the door.

"Sorry," Cortana said, giving a forced smile that vastly contrasted

the two genuine ones she had given early.

Cortana saw the familiar worry lines form on the woman's forehead as Nancy asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Cortana said, motioning over to the bookshelf. "Just memories."

Nancy glanced behind her at the bookshelf and nodded her head. She brought up the manila folder and handed it to Cortana. "That is the file on the writer, as well as the files on everyone who has reviewed his story so far."

"Reviewed?" Cortana asked, slowly taking the folder from Nancy.

Nancy nodded, "You may want to sit down for this."

â€|

"As of December 18th 2012 he has written thirty-two chapters. Posting a new one nearly every day," Nancy said. She sat on the love seat opposite Cortana who sat on the bed methodically flipping through the pages of the file.

"Why?" Cortana asked.

"Look at his medical history."

Cortana did, flipping quickly to the pages. Her eyes scanned the medical file and she thought, _habitual smoker, mild drinker, no drug use, average body temperature 98.3 degrees Fahrenheit, height 5' 10''_. Cortana paused. The writer's height was the same as hers. She continued reading, _weight 205 pounds, physically active, history of depression. _She paused again and looked up at Nancy, "He had to have his stomach pumped out because it was full of blood."

Nancy nodded, "That's not it though. Keep reading."

Cortana's eyes went back to the page, their electric blue hue resting on the small list of medications that the writer was currently on, "He suffers from insomnia."

"Yes, and it has only gotten worse since he began writing the story."

"And you believe that writing the story is causing his insomnia to worsen?" Cortana asked, looking up from the file and raising an eyebrow.

Nancy sighed, "It is hard to psychoanalyze someone without actually meeting them, but the psychiatrists we have on staff believe it is because he does not want to write the story."

Cortana shook her head, "That makes no sense. If he does not want to write it then why doesn't he just stop?"

"Because he can't stop," Nancy said. "And he feels like the story has gone far beyond his ability to control. So he is doing the next best thing, writing as much as he can as fast as he can. Get the story

over as quickly as possible."

Cortana flipped through several more pages to the files on those who had reviewed 'Other Worlds Than These', "Then why is he so worried about quality? He engages nearly every person who leaves a review and actually encourages them to point out what they think he can improve on."

"Because he does not believe himself to be a good writer, and although he wants to finish the story as quickly as possible somewhere deep down he knows that this story is important, and I think that is what scares him."

Cortana glanced up at Nancy and then back down at the folder, "Or perhaps the idea that we might be real scares him." She clenched her jaw, "Are you sure there are only two versions of him."

"Only two that we have found. There could always be more," Nancy said, folding her arms across her lap.

"But these are the only two versions that count."

"Yes,"

Cortana clenched her jaw tighter and her grip on the folder strengthened to the point that it began to crinkle, "And he created a fictional version of himself in this world in order to avoid talking to us."

"Subconsciously yes," Nancy said. "But I don't think he did it on purpose."

"He still did it," Cortana said. She began reading the list of those who had most frequently reviewed the story on . DrkVrtx, SweetMichaela, Adams7, Princess of Love and Hate, Julbot1, dahorseyguy, The Awes0me One, brokenpoet12, fandingo. One name caught her eye and she flipped to his profile, raising an eyebrow as she read it, "Spartan Ninja. Well at least now I know where the kunai came from." She closed the manila folder and ran a hand through her dark hair.

"You are disappointed." Nancy said. A statement, not a question.

"I was hoping for someone a little more impressive," Cortana said.

Nancy gave a small smile, "You were hoping for a Rhodes Scholar, not a working class stiff who writes fanfiction as a hobby."

Cortana shook her head, "Judging by his transcript he could have graduated from any college he wanted, but he didn't. He got one of his short stories published but he has hardly written anything in years, and then one day he just decides to start writing our story. Now you're telling me that he regrets ever starting it, but he feels like he can't stop."

"Because he can't stop," Nancy said. "And I don't think it was even him that decided that the story needed to be written."

"Please do not say ka," Cortana said, throwing the folder

unceremoniously on the bed. "I have had enough of ka. Other than giving me a body it hasn't done me any favors, and I'm not going to let Joseph get away with it as an excuse."

"You think he is responsible for John's death?" Nancy asked, leaning forward slightly.

"I know he is," Cortana said, folding her arms. "And it doesn't matter that he has not written about it yet. He has thought of it, planned for it to happen."

"And you don't think that he wants to change it?"

Cortana fixed Nancy a cold glare, "Can he?"

Nancy sighed, "You have to understand something about the reality he lives in. Time works differently there than anywhere else. It only flows forward, just like it does in mid-world."

"Time in mid-world is broken," Cortana argued.

"Yes, but you still cannot travel backward in time there like you can here and all the other realities. Once something happens in one of the Keystone Worlds there is no changing it."

Cortana closed her eyes. She had once thought that this world, the one that the Rose resided in, was one of the two Keystone Worlds. Like so many other things, however, she was wrong. It was the world that the writer resided in that was the other Keystone World, the other real world. In that world there was no such thing as magic, aliens, demons, or spirits. In that world the Tet Corporation, Sombra, and North Central Positronics did not exist. In that world those things only existed in books, movies, and video games. Yet at the same time they were real, at the same time Cortana who was a fictional character was real, and there was the paradox. Cortana opened her eyes and the glare she had shot Nancy was replaced by a softer, almost hopeful look, "You are afraid that I'm going to kill him."

"Are you?" Nancy asked.

Cortana shook her head, "No. He is the only person that can help me. He is the only one that can bring John back."

"Cortanaâ€|" Nancy started, but stopped. Crushing a person's hope is not an easy thing for a good person to do, even if it is ultimately the right thing to do, and so she kept her peace.

"How long have you been protecting him?" Cortana asked.

"We have been doing our best, but as I said time is tricky in that world. We have to tread lightly in order to avoid causing irrevocable damage. If we screw up there is no taking it back. The King's men know that to, so all their attempts at killing him have been indirect."

"And none of them have worked?" Cortana asked.

"Something always intervenes," Nancy said. She gave a smile, and the warmth of it made Cortana feel better for just a moment. "Don't

worry, I'm not going to say ka."

Cortana smiled back, "You just did." The smile left her face and she looked down at the floor, "Do you have the other thing I asked for?"

"Yes," Nancy said. She reached into her leather briefcase and pulled out a disk which was secured in a plastic case. "Those are all the cutscenes from Halo 4."

"Thank you," Cortana said, taking it. "It's time that Roland hears the rest of my story."

63. Chapter 63

Chapter 63: Halo 5, 6, and Spartan Ops

(Space/Time Anomaly) Algul Siento, Thunderclap, Mid-World

John slowly moved his arm out from underneath Cortana's sleeping form. Her weight, light as she was, had been enough to cut off the blood flow to his limb and the tips of his fingers now felt like they were being pricked with the thousand needles of numbness. With his arm halfway out from underneath her Cortana stirred, and John froze, waiting for her to wake up. Instead she pulled the covers higher up on her shoulders and rolled over in the direction opposite him, completely freeing his imprisoned arm. John flexed his fingers to restore circulation, and then slowly and gracefully swung his legs off the bed and onto the floor. He grabbed his dog tags off the post of the bed, and then fished around in the darkness for his shirt.

â€|

He was where John had expected to find him, the Spartan having determined long ago that the gunslinger rarely slept if ever. Roland was sitting on one of the boulders outside of the bunker, the last Camel cigarette from John Cullum's pack lit and in between the two remaining fingers of his right hand. The gunslinger turned his head to look at John as he approached and the Master Chief stopped. It was nearly pitch black, the light from the moon and stars unable to penetrate the thick clouds that hung over Thunderclap, storm clouds that never rained and never parted, but both John and Roland's unnaturally perceptive eyes were able to see each other as if it were day. John closed his right hand into a fist and brought it up to his forehead. Roland brought his own fist up and returned the salute, "Hile cousin."

"Roland," John said. The gunslinger brought his fist down and turned back around to look into the darkness as he had been doing before. He heard the crunching and breaking of rocks as John walked up behind him, and noticed that the Spartan's eyes winced ever so slightly as he sat down on the boulder opposite him.

Roland took a drag from the cigarette and let it out through his nose. When he began speaking several more trails of smoke let out through his mouth, "You felt it too."

John nodded, "What is it?"

"Ka-shume," Roland said, looking down at the burning embers of tobacco as he did. "A premonition of death within the ka-tet."

John breathed out through his nose, his shoulders sagging as he did, and looked out into the nothingness that Roland was staring at, "Who?"

Roland shook his head, "I do not know, but it will not be me." A certain amount of bitterness entered his voice, "I never die, even when others do."

"Do you think the writer is trying to warn us?" John asked, looking back at Roland.

"I don't think he could even if he wanted to. This is something else."

John nodded again and his eyes went to his boots. He raised them back up at Roland and said, "Cortana might be pregnant."

Roland had raised the cigarette up to his mouth, but set it down again. He looked at John and the two men's light blue eyes locked, "You two were gone for a long time in Fedic." John said nothing and the gunslinger brought the cigarette back up to his mouth, this time taking a drag, and letting the smoke out as he talked, "There is more between us than just being related."

"I've noticed," John said. "We are too much alike."

Roland nodded as he breathed in more smoke from the cigarette, "I believe we are twims."

"Twins across realities like me and John Cullum?"

"John Cullum is a twim to both of us," Roland said. "And you are as I should have been."

John said nothing, Roland's cigarette burning to the halfway point as his eyebrows burrowed in thought, "You care about Cortana. The same way I care about her."

"Aye," Roland said.

"Then you need to make a promise to me," John said, shifting his weight on the boulder so that he could fully turn towards the gunslinger. "If it is me that dies tomorrow I need you to take care of her, to take care of both of them."

"And if it is her?" Roland asked.

John shook his head, "It won't be. She already died once to save me, and if the opportunity comes I will die to save her."

"Ka is a wheel," Roland said. "It may very well be you." He looked back down at the cigarette, the red hot ash on the end coming dangerously close to singeing the hairs on his knuckles. Nevertheless he took another drag on it, the heat burning against his lip. "You have my word gunslinger."

â€|

10:09 P.M., December 18th 2012 (Gregorian Calendar) Dark Tower Building, Tet Corporation Headquarters, New York, New York

Cortana's fist had almost connected with the door to Roland's apartment when the gunslinger spoke, "It is open." Of course he had heard her coming, had even been able to tell it was her by the unique sound of her footsteps. _John was able to do that too, _Cortana thought, and pushed it down as she opened the door. Roland was sitting on the bed, both gun belts and the blue steeled revolvers displayed across his lap. Beside him was a full carton of Camel cigarettes, unfiltered, and five boxes of Long Colt 45 caliber bullets. One box was open and the gunslinger was methodically examining each round before placing it in one of the gun belts.

"I guess it's not the bullets that are special after all," Cortana said, watching Roland place another one in the strap.

"No," Roland said, not looking up at her.

"Then it must be the guns themselves."

Roland shook his head, "It is neither the bullets nor the guns, but the one who wields them."

Cortana raised an eyebrow as she sat down on the love seat couch, the Halo 4 disk in both hands, "I saw a bullet from one of those guns tear the skull off of a Brute. I have serious doubts that a person can do that just by wanting it to happen."

Roland merely shrugged, as if to say that Cortana could suit herself if she pleased. His eyes moved to her face and Cortana found that she could now look into them, although it still made her feel uncomfortable. He nodded his head towards the disk, "What is that?"

"Remember when you asked me what a video game is?" Cortana asked, and Roland nodded. "Well do you know what a movie is?"

"Yes. Moving fotergraphes."

"Photographs," Cortana said slowly.

Roland's eyes remained steady, another bullet in between his fingers, "Fotergraphes."

Cortana sighed, "Never mind. A video game is like an interactive movie. I said it would be easier to show you what one was than explain it to you, but unless you have ten hours to killâ€|"

"I don't," Roland said.

"Thought so. I asked only for the cutscenes, and I'll explain to you what happens in between them. John and I never did finish telling the rest of our story."

Roland nodded, setting the gun belt down in his lap. He reached behind him and grabbed an already open box of cigarettes along with a book of matches. As he slid one out Cortana coughed and he looked out

of the corners of his eyes at her.

"Don't smoke around me."

"Why?"

"Because," Cortana said, moving her hand to her stomach, "It's bad for the baby."

Roland's eyebrows furrowed, giving her a look of confusion, "There is nothing unhealthy about smoking."

The features on Cortana's face hardened, "I'm not going to have this argument with you. Just don't smoke around me anymore." Roland's jaw tightened, but he slid the cigarette back into the box and placed it on the bed next to him. Cortana stood up and grabbed the remote from the nightstand next to the bed, working her thumb on the multitude of buttons without looking at it. Both the T.V. and the DVD player underneath turned on almost simultaneously, the door for the disk sliding smoothly open. She walked across the room towards the T.V., feeling Roland's eyes following her as she did. Cortana placed the DVD in the slot and closed it with one finger.

As they waited for it to start Roland asked, "Have you talked with Nancy about the writer?"

"Yes," Cortana said, looking up at the T.V. and quickly flipping through the options on the DVD menu. "They have only one door that opens on his world. We'll go through it tomorrow so that we can meet him. Time only seems to flow forward in that world so we can't afford to make any mistakes."

"And what will you say to him?" Roland asked.

"I don't know," Cortana said. "Somehow though I'm going to make sure he finds a way to bring John back." She hit the down arrow on the remote and her thumb hovered over the select button, waiting for Roland to respond before she hit play. In her mind she thought, _And make sure I do not go to The Dark Tower with you. _

"And if he can't?" Roland asked.

"He will," Cortana said. She tried to sound confident, but the gunslinger heard doubt laced deep within her voice. "What exactly do you think he is?"

"Kas-ka Gan," Roland said, the gunslinger having resumed his inspection of the bullets.

Cortana turned her head slightly in Roland's direction, "An interpreter of the will of the White?"

"Aye," Roland said.

Cortana shook her head and turned back towards the T.V., "He can change some things though."

"But he may not be able to choose what he can change," Roland said. "You need to prepare yourself for that."

"I'm not a fan of illogic, and you have to understand how little sense this makes to me," Cortana said. "He is part of our ka-tet. If for whatever reason he does not finish the story then all of us get stuck in a sort of limbo. We won't know what to do or where to go, so nothing will happen, yet everyone here keeps saying that just because he writes the story does not make it his story. And now you and Nancy are telling me that Joseph is only doing what the White is telling him to do, and if the White tells him not to change something then he can't change it."

"Aye, no matter how hard he tries," Roland said.

Cortana sighed and looked down at her thumb which was still over the select button, "You know this has already happened before, the story stopping I mean. The Crimson King was almost successful in taking John and I out of the story forever. After Halo 3 ended Bungie stopped the story with us stranded on the Forward Unto Dawn. They made three other Halo games after that, but they never went back to finish our story, and because of that we were stranded there for nearly five years. I guess something intervened. The White, or ka, or whatever you want to call it. The Mantel, the right to tell our story, was passed on to a company called 343 Industries, and without them making Halo 4 me and John would have been stuck on the Dawn for eternity." Cortana cleared her throat and she turned around to face Roland, "And now I find out that 343 Industries is planning on making Halo 5 and 6. They have even started an episodic series called Spartan Ops, and it is already starting to deviate from the story John and I come from." She swallowed, forcing down the emotions that were building up inside her, "Do you know what that means?"

Roland placed the gun belt back down on his lap, thinking, "That there is another version of the UNSC out there, one that hasn't been destroyed. That there is another version of John." Cortana nodded and she turned away from him, but not before Roland saw that her eyes and grown red. "You could go there, go to him."

Cortana shook her head, nearly laughing as she did, "I can't. You'll understand after you watch this, but if I did that I would be the biggest hypocrite in existence." Her thumb went back to the select button. She put pressure on it, but still did not press it, "Because it doesn't matter how similar they are. He wouldn't be my Spartan, not my John." She gave a forced laugh and her hand went back to her stomach, "Besides there would be a few things that will be hard to explain. Either way I can never go home." She increased the pressure with her thumb and pressed the button. The DVD started to play.

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It was similar to when Cortana first started telling Roland her story. Her first conversation with the gunslinger seemed like several lifetimes ago, and it seemed impossible to believe that only a little over a month and a half had passed. The gunslinger, as before, gave no hint of wonder or amazement. What few questions he did ask were practical ones, and only when he needed Cortana to clarify a term or explain certain technologies. He never gave any follow up questions, content with the simple explanations that Cortana gave him. The only time he showed more than passive interest was in the first cutscene, and it was then that he asked three questions nearly on top of one another.

"Dr. Halsey looks like you," Roland said. It was more of a statement than a question, but Cortana still counted it as one.

"More like I look like her. I was created based off of her own brain, and I was able to choose how I looked. At the time I decided to look like a younger version of her, similar enough in appearance to be her daughter."

The gunslinger nodded, and then raised an eyebrow as the image of John as a child appeared on the screen. Cortana felt her own chest constrict, and nearly missed the second question that Roland asked her, "That is John?"

"Yes," Cortana said, breathing out as she did.

"He does look a little like Jake," Roland said.

"If you took away the freckles and gave him blonde hair he would look exactly like him," She said. Glancing over at Roland she added, "And I don't suppose it is a coincidence that Jake looks like a younger version of you as well."

"No," Roland said, but that was all he said. His eyebrows raised several times as the cutscene continued, mostly as he watched the Spartans in action, almost as if he approving. His mouth opened slightly as if he was preparing to speak when Cortana was presented to John for the first time, but he closed it again. It was only towards the end of the cutscene, as Cortana was about to wake John from his cryosleep, that he asked his third question. "You were a spirit, like Church in Fedic." Again it was more of a statement than a question, but Cortana felt that she could not be picky when it came to Roland.

"More like a highly advance computer capable of feeling human emotions, but to put it in terms you understand I was a being of pure intelligence. I only received a physical body after I died."

Roland nodded, but his eyes went from the holographic image of Cortana on the screen, to the physical version of her sitting on the couch with her arms folded. Even in her pure AI form she seemed far too human to be just a machine, and the gunslinger wondered if John had been right, if she had never truly been a machine to begin with.

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It was towards the end of the game, when the Master Chief and Cortana had arrived at Installation 03, that the Cortana that was sitting on the love seat in the room with Roland did not pause the DVD as she had each time before to explain to him what happened in the parts that were not shown. Instead one cutscene bled into another and Roland looked over at her. Cortana lay there, head slumped against the side of the couch and the remote hanging in her lap by only the tips of her fingers, fast asleep. Roland looked back up at the T.V., and decided he did not need to see what happened next. Watching Cortana slowly die on screen, listening to her explain the process of her death to him, had affected him far more than what he had expected although he had been careful not to show it. The last thing he wanted to see was her actual death. He took the remote from her hand and

examined the buttons on it, walking up to the T.V. as he did. Defeated he through the remote over his shoulder onto the bed and he pulled the plug to the T.V. out of the electrical socket on the wall. He moved back to Cortana and gently picked her up in his arms.

The gunslinger made almost no sound as walked the short distance between his room and hers, and Cortana had did little more than snore softly as he set her down in her own bed, pulling the covers up over her. He watched her roll over on the bed, wrapping an arm around one of the pillows that she had placed in the center of the bed, no doubt to give her body the illusion that John was still sleeping next to her. As Roland walked out of the room, flipping off the light switch to the 'sparklights' and closing the door behind him, he brought out the pack of cigarettes that he had grabbed earlier. Striking one of the matches he brought it up to the end of the cigarette, breathing in deeply as he did.

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As always Cortana dreamed of The Dark Tower. But there was something different this time. She did not see Roland coming to the Tower at dusk, winding his horn. What she saw instead, an image blurred like a mirage but still focused enough to burn a hole in her memory, gave Cortana another reason to go to the lynchpin of all existence.

John was at The Dark Tower.

64. Chapter 64

Chapter 64: Aileen Ritter

**A/N For those of you who don't know I work outside all day, so I'm a slave to the weather. Freezing rain today so you get your next chapter early again. Enjoy. **

_William O'Falley's horse moved uneasily in the cold driving rain, the kind of rain that turns to ice on men's backs and freezes the world in a sheet of glass. He pulled the hood of his jacket farther over his head in an attempt to keep the ice cold water from running down his neck, knowing full well how meaningless the gesture was. Around him stood forty men, John Farson's rebels, all of whom were directly under his command. They clung to their medieval weapons, pikes, crossbows, and swords, almost as if they were looking for them to bring warmth. O'Falley knew better than that, knew that the only way to get out of this driving rain would be after they got that infernal machine to work. _

_ The company was camped in front of a partially collapsed square concrete building, one of the ruins left behind by the Old People. In front of the building were four metal structures, all but one now rusted beyond repair, and the fourth having been completely demolished by the collapse of the steel roof overhead which shielded people from rain such as this thousands of years ago. In front of the both the concrete building and the old gas pumps was a sign, faded almost beyond the point of recognition, and having sunk in the ground so far that it was nearly completely covered by dirt. Yet O'Falley could still read the tops of two numbers on the sign, 7-11. He knew not what it meant, and honestly did not care. What he cared about, what the Good Man John Farson cared about, was what was underneath

the ruins, and the only way to get the precious petrol was through one of the ancient mechanical pumps. _

_ The metal lid covering the cavern underneath the gas pumps was nearly frozen completely shut, and it took the better part of half an hour to get it free. When it was free four men, the only four men in O'Falley's company that had any knowledge, what little there was, about machines, put a long rubber hose attached to a portable gas powered pump, and they had now spent the rest of the hour trying to get it to start. _

_ A man pulled on the rope cord which was frayed almost to the point of failure, and O'Falley was already thinking of ways to punish the man if the rope should happen to break. He looked at large white cylindrical container on the back of a horse drawn cart which was to contain the diesel once it was pumped out, then back at the four men which were currently fiddling with the mechanical pump, flipping switches on it that O'Falley could only begin to fathom the use for. Right now he was cold, and wet, and did not give a flying fuck what they were for. "I thought you boys said you could get that machine to work." _

_ The man who was pulling on the cord looked up at him and said, "We can say, but this machine is older than all of us. Just takes a little coaxing." _

_ "It is a machine, not a damn virgin in heat," O'Falley said, the scowl that was currently on his face losing much of its effect because of the hood over his head. "Treat it like a woman who gives you lip. Kick it." _

_ "Kick it?" the man asked, looking unsure. "What if we break it?" _

_ "Then make sure you don't," O'Falley said. "Do it." The man hesitated, and O'Falley could feel his anger rising, but just before he was about to strike him the man kicked the mechanical pump half heartedly. He bent over and pulled the cord again. As he pulled it out the frayed and ancient rope finally snapped, sending the man flying backwards, but not before the machine made the sputtering sound of a dying man, and the engine finally kicked over. O'Falley smiled at the roar of the engine, seeing the rubber hose drape as diesel was finally being pumped through it. "Now didn't Uncle Bill tell ya so? All you have to do is—" _

_ Thunder roared across the sky and the man who had started the engine fell backwards in a spray of blood. The horse that O'Falley was sitting on reared upwards in surprise, threatening to kick him off. O'Falley cursed the horse into submissiveness, his muscles tensing as hot lead flew around him like angry hornets, felling half his company in the first volley. The blood froze as it hit the ground, mixing with the mud and rain to form a grotesque and morbid portrait of death. The shots seemed to be coming from every direction at once, and O'Falley's men panicked, the few who ran being cut down like dogs, the majority who stayed firing their crossbows blindly into the darkness. O'Falley attempted to rally his men, drawing his own sword and raising it into the air. He turned to the pike men, "Form ranks. Advance into the grass and root them out." _

_ The pike men formed into a loose phalanx, their long spear tipped

staves pointing in the general direction that the wall of death was coming from. O'Falley rode behind them as the slowly advanced forward, watching as the last of his crossbow men were cut down, arms and legs separating from torsos as the bullets struck them. The phalanx moved into the tall grass, coming to the waist of the tallest man in the formation, and O'Falley stopped his horse, straining his eyes to try and see the enemy that was hiding in them. The gunfire stopped, and O'Falley heard a sound that stole the fight out of him like a thief in the night. It was a low rumbling sound, full of anger and defiance, and it was in an instant that O'Falley realized it was the Horn of Gilead. It was not just a band of gunslingers that had ambushed his rebels, it was The Gunslinger. Shadows moved around the phalanx, surrounding them, and O'Falley could just make out the glint of knives and the butts of revolvers digging into the formation like the teeth of a wolf. The screams from his men was enough to break the last of his resolve, and O'Falley kicked the sides of his horse and galloped away, faster than he had ever ridden before. He knew not how long he rode at full speed, the seconds ticking away with almost deliberate slowness. He chanced a look around and saw that the ruins had faded into little more than a speck on the horizon, and he allowed the horses pace to slow. He never heard the bullet that struck him, but felt it impact the lower half of his jaw, driving itself deep into his throat. The horse reared itself again, and this time O'Falley was thrown off, his body covered in a thick sheet of ice by the time the horse had made its own escape into the west.

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_ Roland, now a man in his early twenties and with only a fraction of the scars that would come to mark his body throughout his unnaturally long life, moved into towards the cart that the fuel was meant to be loaded on. He drew one of the sandalwood revolvers from its holster, a flash of lightning illuminating the blue steel, and shot both horses that were hitched to the cart in the head. With speed that the human eye could only barely register he reloaded two bullets into the empty chambers and twirled the revolver back into the holster. Moving further into the ruined gas station, ice crunching beneath his boots, he saw Cuthbert Allgood and Alain Johns, gunslingers he had known since the age of since when he was sent to Cort to begin training, kneel beside the mechanical gas pump which was still humming and pumping gas into the cylindrical container. To his right he saw a woman, iron guns at her sides, with long dark hair and tanned skin, move step by step beside him. _

_ Behind the woman a soldier with a bleeding gut, intestines draped across his abdomen and already shinning with a thin coat of ice, raised his cross bow at her back. She moved faster than Roland's eye could see, faster than any eye could see, and Roland had only just touched the grip of his own revolver when the woman had spun around and fired. The bullet plowed through the man's chest and he slumped over. The woman turned around and smirked as she holstered her revolver, "Too slow Roland." _

_ "You've improved," Roland said, watching the woman as she walked past him, kneeling down next to the machine along with Alain and Cuthbert. _

_ The woman glanced up at him and smirked again, "I was already a better shot than you. Maybe I should be dinh." _

_ Cuthbert shook his head, "Doesn't matter how fast or how good of a shot you are. Roland has something none of the rest of us has."_

_ The woman raised an eyebrow, "Oh and what's that?"_

_ "Luck," Cuthbert said, looking up at Roland. "Or ka. Whatever you want to call it Roland has it."_

_ Roland ignored the banter and turned to Alain, "What is it?"_

_ Alain rubbed two of his fingers along the length of the gasket connecting the rubber hose to the pump and then held them up to his nose, "Diesel. Same thing we found in Mejis. Farson's men are trying to secure fuel to power the Old People's war machines."_

_ "They're called tanks right?" Cuthbert ask, running his own fingers over the gasket and smelling them._

_ "Mayhap," Alain said. He stopped, seemed to stare off into the distance, and then shook his head as if to clear the dust off of his mind. _

_ "What did you see?" Roland asked. Alain had some abilities in the touch, could sniff out even the most well concealed ambush, but what visions he did get were often vague and blurry. Still, it was good practice to ask. _

_ "Same thing as before. A long grassy hill covered in bodies. Not sure what it means._

_ "Does this come before or after the blue woman and the green cyclops with the golden eye?" the woman asked, not bothering to conceal the humor in her voice. _

_ "Before, I think," Alain said. _

_ Cuthbert, who was busy rubbing the two fingers he had rubbed along the gasket together, said, "Mayhap we should keep this place secure. If we could find one of those war machinesâ€¦"_

_ Roland shook his head, "Never trust a machine." He brought his boot up and kicked the gasket, the rubber hose flying off and diesel fuel spilling onto the icy ground in front of him. "Destroy it."

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Slowly opening his eyes the gunslinger looked up at the white ceiling above him. It had been ages since he had thought about Aileen Ritter, the first female gunslinger and the only other woman who had ever loved him besides Susan Delgado. Roland could not return her affections of course, not so soon after Susan's death, although he did not have it in him not to give Aileen hope, foolish and misguided hope though it was. Ka was a wheel, always turning, and now Roland found himself in the same position Aileen had been in all those centuries ago. She was fast, perhaps not the fastest gunslinger, but still faster than him. What made her so formidable, what had impressed even Roland, was her aim. He could not remember the last time he thought about the shot she made at the old gas station,

hitting a moving target nearly half a wheel away in the driving rain with only a revolver. What he remembered most about her, when he remembered her at all, was what she had done when he and his gunslingers had destroyed the Cult of Amoco. There she had made a shot, an impossible shot, a shot that no one else could have made. A shot that not even Roland in his prime with the blue steeled revolvers could have hoped to make. The gunslinger wondered briefly if any of John's Spartan's had ever been as accurate or as fast as Aileen, realizing for the first time how very little he actually knew about those gunslingers from another world. He also wondered what had caused him to have the dream about Aileen in the first place. A female form stirred beside him on the bed and Roland glanced over at her.

"Well that was certainly unexpected," the woman said, propping herself up on her elbows, her golden hair falling down around her shoulders.

Roland raised an eyebrow, "That's why. "This was not unexpected," he said.

The woman's red lips curved into a smile her grayish blue eyes staring into Roland's "All I did was ask you if there was anything I could help you with."

"And I said no," Roland said. He reached over on the night stand and grabbed a pack of cigarettes, lit one and handed it over to the woman who took it in between two fingers, before lighting his own. "You are the one that came back later."

"Just doing what Ms. Deepneau told me to do," the woman said and Roland looked at her. "Well maybe not exactly this. After I saw you put Cortana to bed I just had to get to know you better."

"You did," Roland said. He put the cigarette in between his lips and got out of bed. As he was pulling his jeans on the woman sat up, the blanket around her waist and her chest fully showing.

"You don't even know my name do you?"

"No, and I don't want to know," Roland said, pulling his long sleeved red cotton shirt over his head, the cigarette now resting comfortably in the ashtray. As picked it back up and took another drag the woman in the bed sighed.

"Figures. I never had any luck with men." She ran her fingers through her tangled and disheveled hair, frowning, "I'm going to have to get a shower before I go to work. Care to join me?"

"You already got what you came for," Roland said. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck and he stared at a point on the wall opposite him, the hallway on the other side of it. He smashed the butt into the ash tray, smoke rolling over his knuckles. He grabbed the ashtray and stuck it out towards the woman, "Put out your cigarette."

The woman took a defiant puff and asked, "Why?"

"Because Cortana is coming," He said.

The woman was frozen for several seconds before she let out a loud

curse and shoved the half smoked cigarette in the ashtray. She flung herself onto the opposite side of the bed and began to frantically search for her discarded clothes, only having just but her bra on when the doorknob turned and Cortana walked into the room. She stood there in the doorway, her feet on top of the brass partition on the floor that separated the apartment from the hallway, looking between Roland and the half naked woman in his bed.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt your morning recreation." Cortana raised her eyes at Roland, eyebrows high on her forehead, "Ready?"

Roland nodded, slinging his satchel over his shoulder, "Did you eat enough this morning?"

"Yes," Cortana said irritably, "It's so nice to have my own personal dietician."

Roland ignored the jab and asked, "And the sickness?"

"Better," Cortana answered the edge in her voice lessening. "Still nauseas, but the pills seem to help."

"Good," Roland said. Without sparing a second glance at the golden haired woman on the bed, he followed Cortana out of the room, closing the door behind him. The woman let out a long breath and flopped back down on the pillows.

_Guess that one is not going to call me either, _she thought, still running her hands disapprovingly through her messy hair. _I wonder why Cortana is sick. _Her hands stopped mid stroke through her golden curls, as if pondering a thought, and then shook her head deciding it was ridiculous.

65. Chapter 65

Chapter 65: Our World

Doomed love is like a flare shot into the sky, burning hot white and killing the night around it, but only for a moment. Two sparks that ignite and burn everything around them, including themselves, yet even the few who know their fate are unable to keep the fire from burning. It is the slow burning embers that last the longest, but few ever write about that kind of love. We, readers and writers alike, are interested most in the lost cause. The tragedy of the warrior who gives everything in battle, even his last breath, but still cannot overcome the multitude of arms that have been set against him.

Thermopylae, Reach, Jericho Hill.

We may console ourselves in knowing that there are some defeats more triumphant than victories, but for those who are destroyed by love, which can be a far deadlier weapon than even Excalibur, it may be little comfort.

See them now and see them well, for they are each other's doom.

John and Cortana

Roland and Susan

(Space/Time Anomaly) Mejis, Outer Baronies, Mid-World

The floor boards of the barn were a faded brownish grey, the heads of square iron nails sticking up out of many of them like a pin cushion. Isolated rays of sunlight trickled through the holes in the roof, signs of water damage and neglect littering the ceiling above them. The two of them lay in the farthest corner of the barn, one of the few places they could meet in secret without the fear of getting caught, on a deer skin matt that just barely fit both of their bodies, a grey wool blanket draped over both of them. Roland was lying on his back, his satchel being used as a makeshift pillow underneath his head, smoke from his hand rolled cigarette floating above his head like wisps of clouds. Susan Delgado lay beside him, her head on his chest and listening to the steady drum of his heart beating the familiar tempo that she had come to know so well. His right arm was draped around her shoulder.

"Roland?" she asked, and he squeezed her shoulder to let her know that he was listening. "What are you going to do after this is over?"

Roland, who had just put his cigarette back up to his mouth, pulled it away. He flicked it across the barn and watched the orange red embers rain on the floor as the butt hit the wall. "We go to Gilead."

"We?" Susan asked, turning her head to look at him with her grayish blue eyes and placing her opposite ear over his heart. Her golden blonde hair slid across his chest as she moved and Roland began to run his hands through it.

Roland nodded, "We."

"As in you and I?" She asked, and Roland nodded again. "And when exactly were you going to ask me to come with you?"

Roland shrugged, "I already knew the answer."

Susan arched a thin black eyebrow, "A little sure of ourselves aren't we?"

The corners of Roland's mouth twitched upwards "Aye."

Susan sighed and shook her head, "This is what I get for falling in love with a gunslinger."

"You can always stay," Roland said, and Susan curled her hand into a fist and brought it down lightly on his chest.

"Of course I'm coming with you. Where would you Cuthbert and Alain be without me to help you?"

"Less distracted," Roland said, and Susan brought her fist down on his chest again, a little harder this time.

Susan moved her grey eyes upward at the sunlight poking through the roof, "Is it true that they have sparklights in Gilead?"

"Aye, but only in the Great Hall."

"I've heard rumors about them. About how they burn bright as the sun even in the dead of night, how they can burn for days on end without going out. I even heard they run on electricity and not magic, like the Old People use to use."

Roland's chest rumbled and amusement crept into his voice, "Aye, although I have only ever seen them once."

Susan smiled up at him, "And they have books there too?" Roland nodded. "And libraries?" Roland nodded again and her smile grew, "I have never seen a book before, although I have always wanted to read one."

"You will," Roland said, laying his head back down on the satchel.

There was silence for several minutes, and Roland had just closed his eyes when Susan spoke again, "How old were you when you began training?"

"Six," Roland said, not opening his eyes. "As was Cuthbert and Alain."

"And that is true for all gunslingers?"

"Aye," Roland said.

Susan bit her lip and dug her head deeper into his chest, her hand going to the flat of her belly, "And if it is a boy, he will have to do the same."

Roland opened his eyes and looked down at her, "That is the law."

Susan closed her eyes slowly and then opened them again, "I know you love me Roland, but your duty to the Affiliation and Gilead is always going to come first." She shook her head, "I just worry what will happen if you have to choose between us."

"It will never come to that," Roland said, and although his voice was a wall of confidence Susan's eyes still held doubt.

"Don't make me a promise you can't keep." She propped herself up on his chest with her elbows, leveling her eyes with his. "Could you do it, sacrifice me to complete your mission? Could you watch me die?"

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He could, and he did.

â€|

9:10 A.M., December 19th, 2012 (Gregorian Calendar) Dark Tower Building, Tet Corporation Headquarters, New York, New York

In some ways Cortana was happy with what she had found when she

entered Roland's room that morning. Not that she was happy for Roland, although a small part of her was, but because there was at least one way the gunslinger was vastly different from John. Yet there was something about the woman that was in Roland's bed that troubled her. She looked alarmingly familiar to a woman Cortana had only ever seen once before, and as her and Roland walked in semi awkward silence down the hallway towards the staging area where the door that would take them to the writer was being prepared she voiced her concern.

"This isn't the first time is it? That you have slept with a woman that looks like Susan Delgado?"

Roland turned his head slightly to look at her, "How do you know what Susan looked like?"

"Walter showed me," she said.

Roland's jaw tightened and Cortana could see the muscles in his face become rigid, "He would." He turned his head away from her and his cold eyes burned a hole in the door that was still some fifty meters away from them. He began to quicken his pace, almost as if he were trying to physically avoid the question, but Cortana managed to keep up despite the difference in stride.

"Is it?" she asked.

"No," Roland said.

Cortana's expression softened, the small smile she gave him filled with more sadness than any frown she could conjure. For the first time since Walter had shown her the series of visions Cortana truly felt sorry for the gunslinger, and with another twang of sadness she realized that the two of them had something very fundamental in common with one another. "You really loved her, didn't you?"

Roland slowed his pace, his posture faltering but his eyes still fixed squarely on the door in front of them, "I still do."

â€|

Delta's voice came through the speaker above the automatic sliding door as Roland and Cortana both looked up at it. It was an unneeded but reflexive gesture even for Cortana who knew that advanced AI's, even one such as Delta who could only barely be considered a smart one, were essentially everywhere at once. It was somewhat strange for Cortana to be on the opposite end of this unique human quirk, the closest she ever came to being in a single place at once prior to receiving her body being when she was either contained in her chip or in John's armor. Her emotions had always been genuine but when she was still a pure AI Cortana had been able to compartmentalize and regulate them with subroutines thus never allowing them to interfere with her ability to function, at least prior to the onset of rampancy. However, since she was now contained within a flesh and blood body feelings could no longer be controlled in such a manner and thus when she had met the AI Church in Fedic Cortana had given almost no thought to this strange turning of the tables. Yet, much of the vast intellect she had when she was a pure AI had remained with her so along with pondering this thought she simultaneously

contemplated the small window of insight she had gained into Roland's feelings and motives, how in all the worlds John was able to keep such a tight grip on his emotions when Cortana felt like she had hardly any control over them, if John really was at The Dark Tower, and what she would say to the writer once they met him. She thought of all of this and much more all while keeping the majority of her attention on the unfolding conversation.

"The doorway is ready for entry. Agent 1588's squad will be placed in reserve to provide support if necessary, however I have deemed this mission to be of moderate risk only."

"Well that is certainly comforting," Cortana said, glancing back over her shoulder. The cavernous room was a flurry of activity as technicians and scientists darted around the steel door which rested securely on four clamps in the room's center. Next to the doorway but in a place that seemed to be out of the way of the technical staffs' predetermined paths as they moved from terminal to terminal, and monitor to monitor, all while holding those thick but highly advanced data pads, were the four Agents Roland and Cortana had witnessed retrieving the artifact yesterday. Of them only Agent 1588 had his helmet off, his hair black and short cropped and looking no older than twenty-five. His face was clean shaven and had the chiseled features of any Spartan of the UNSC but without the burning thousand yard stare in his hazel eyes. His eyes were bright and intelligent, the eyes of someone who truly enjoyed the position they held in life. Cortana's eyes wandered upward towards the observation deck, and although the view of the interior of the room was blocked by the one way mirror she could still feel the presence there. It was like an itch on the spot of your back that you cannot quite reach, yet you are fully aware and irritated by its presence. That was how Cortana felt as she searched the one way mirror, looking for any hint or sign of where Dr. Halsey was standing in the room watching her. Giving up Cortana looked back at the speaker Delta's voice was coming from. "What time is it in that world Delta?"

"The time flow in the writer's reality is roughly parallel, although not exactly. The current time in that world is 1102 Hours."

Cortana nodded and next to her Roland asked, "How close will the doorway take us to the writer?"

"Right outside his house."

"That close?" Roland asked.

"Given the unique way time works in the writer's reality we felt it was best to have the doorway open as close as possible to him."

Cortana gave a small halfhearted smirk, "In other words they don't want to give us the chance to screw something up."

"Precisely," Delta said, and although his voice was heavily synthetic Cortana could detect the slightest trace of humor in it. There was a noticeable pause before Delta began speaking again, "Cortana, Agent 1588 would like to speak with you before you go through the doorway."

Cortana blinked and turned around to look at the Agent. From the way

he had quickly turned his head Cortana guessed he had been staring at her, "Alright. You going to be okay by yourself Roland?"

"I'll manage," the gunslinger said. He began to walk towards the doorway, peering over the shoulder of one of the technicians who had a short blue cord connecting the data pad to one of the clamps on the doorway. The technician glanced behind him, his brown eyes connecting with Roland's cold blue ones, and began to tap on the data pad faster. As Cortana approached Agent 1588, the burning itch that was Dr. Halsey's eyes from the observation deck becoming more irritating as she did, he raised a closed fist to his forehead and saluted her.

"Ma'am," the Agent dropped his fist and folded his hands behind his back in a posture that mimicked that of Nancy Deepneau. Cortana looked him over for a few seconds, unsure of what to say, hoping that he would be the first to speak. His armor, like that of the rest of his squad which was the size of a UNSC fire team, was a light blue with the sigil of a white rose on the right chest plate.

She waited for him to speak, but the Agent just stood there and Cortana realized that he was deferring to her. "Agent 1588?" she asked, and he nodded. "Do you have a real name?"

"David," the Agent said. He looked hesitant, the control he had over his emotions present but not up to par with that of a Spartan II, and Cortana could read them like an open page across his face. It was not because he had given her his name, Cortana realized, but because he was speaking to her. He was nervous.

Again Cortana was not sure what to say, and tried to throw subtle hints with her facial features that she wanted him to continue speaking. He did not, still looking hesitant. Cortana cleared her throat, a reflex she had created as a pure AI and now a physical necessity at times, and asked, "I'm curious, why did you decide to work for the Tet Corporation?"

"I was recruited ma'am," David said.

Cortana stifled the urge to look at the observation deck, for the first time considering that Dr. Halsey may have recreated the Spartan II program in this reality, kidnapped children and all. "Recruited?" she asked, wanting David to clarify the word.

"Its bit of a long story ma'am," David said, looking over at the technicians who were now all at the terminals and beginning final preparations.

"I have time," Cortana said dismissively. She gave him a small smile, "You are not squirming your way out of this. Besides you are the one that wanted me to come over here."

David returned the smile, showing some of his teeth as he did, "I guess I just wanted to say thank you."

"Thank you?" Cortana asked, puzzled.

David nodded, "My parents died in a car crash when I was eight, and I was bounced around between foster homes for about five years after that. I was a bit of troubled kid then, got into more fights than I

can remember and expelled on more than one occasion. Then the Tet Corporation found me, offered me a scholarship to any private school and later any college I wanted provided that I came and worked for them as soon as I graduated. At the time I accepted because I was tired of going from family to family and never being in the same place for more than a year, but they paid for me to go to therapy, got me tutors so that I could actually pass all my classes. Without Tet I don't know where I would be right now." He brought his right hand out from behind his back and held it up between them, looking at the gauntleted glove, "And I never thought I would be doing this." He put his hand back behind his back and continued, "I've played Halo since I was a kid. I guess you could say that you and the Master Chief were one of the few role models I had growing up." He shook his head and began smiling again, "But I never thought I would be doing it for real, or that I would be meeting you in person."

There was a tangible lump in Cortana's throat, the same emotions she felt when she saw the monument in the Dark Tower lobby threatening to overcome her. David's emotions were genuine, his voice sincere, and that made it even worse for her. She let her eyes wander around the staging area, the heart of the Tet Corporation's forays into other worlds. An organization that would remain standing would continue the fight against the agents of the Red even long after the Ka-tet of the Nineteen was gone. _We did it John, _Cortana thought. _You did it. _In the back of her mind, where the impossible hope of seeing her Spartan again was kept, Cortana decided that the first thing she would do was bring John here and show him everything that he helped create. That he was good for more than dealing out lead and death. Cortana looked at David again and said, "No, I think I should be the one thanking you."

David gave her a confused look, "Ma'am?"

His confused look deepened when Cortana gave him her first genuine smile of the day, "I know you don't understand, but maybe someday you will."

"It's ready," a technician with thick glasses and a mug of coffee perched dangerously close to the keyboard he was typing away at furiously said. There was a low humming from the ceiling and Cortana could feel the hair on the back of her neck and arms stand up as the air seemed to fill with static electricity.

"You better get going," David said, placing his helmet on his head. When he spoke again his voice came through the speakers on the helmet, "Those doorways don't stay open forever."

Cortana nodded her goodbye to him and walked over to Roland who was now standing by the doorway. He did not turn around as he addressed her, "You should be the one to open it."

Cortana said nothing, suddenly aware of the tumultuous feeling in the pit of her stomach that had nothing to do with her pregnancy. Her hand seemed to take its own time, unaware of Cortana's urging for it to move faster as it reached out and grabbed the handle on the door. She twisted and pulled the heavy steel door opening effortlessly on its hinges. Through the doorway she saw a wall of white. Her eyes adjusted to the difference in lighting on the other side of the door and she saw that it was not a wall but the door to a garage. She took a deep breath, feeling the air scrape across her teeth and lips,

aware of how alive and how fragile she was in her physical form, and all too aware of the possibility that this man with just one misthought could send both her and the gunslinger to oblivion. As she stepped through a part of her hoped that Roland was right, that there were some things in the story that Joseph could not change even if he wanted to.

â€|

11:21 A.M., December 19th 2012 (Gregorian Calendar) Fredericksburg, Virginia

The numbers for the access code that opened up the garage added up to nineteen, something that did not surprise Cortana, but did worry her. She worried about what she would find inside the writer's house, and most of all about what he himself would look like. There were no cars in the small narrow driveway, and a large part of her was relieved and the uneasy feeling her stomach subsided. The inside of the garage smelled of sawdust and cigarette smoke. Scraps of wood had been leaned up in a pile against one of the walls, a table saw preventing them from falling over. There was a series of shelves and a cluttered work bench on the right hand side of the garage, and on one of the shelves in a black crate Cortana could see the military camouflage of an army helmet sticking out amidst a pile of construction hardhats. Running along the wall that butted up against the side of the house was another work bench, the work space filled with power tools and hand tools, and above the work bench were homemade wooden cabinets made of cherry, the red and brown of the wood blending together in a signature beauty. She walked forward, the gunslinger behind her, but stopped as she neared the landing of the stairs that would lead them inside the house. Beside a blue and grey tailgate chair which was set up next to the work bench, an ashtray filled near to the top on a small metal stand next to it, were a pair of weather worn boots. They were dark brown with flecks of red clay around their rubber soles. She looked at the boots, and then down at her own. The boots on her feet were smaller, but other than that there was no discernible difference. Cortana shook her head and continued to the stairs, the floor boards creaking as the gunslinger followed her up. She frowned as she looked down at the lock.

"Can you break it?" she asked.

"Try opening it first," Roland said. Cortana gripped the brass doorknob, noticing that it was similar in appearance to the one on the ghost wood door in the Calla. As she twisted her wrist the handle on the door turned easily. Again this concerned her as she could no longer count on things being coincidences. This was either the work of ka, or perhaps an even more disturbing thought, that the writer had expected them to come and had left the door unlocked so that they could enter. He may only have done it subconsciously but the idea was still unsettling.

â€|

Cortana had grown use to paradoxes, and had known the writer was a bit of a paradox himself from reading his file. Everything was in there, all except for a picture as Cortana had wanted to wait until she actually met him to know what he looked like. She could not explain exactly why she wanted it that way, but she wanted it nonetheless. Yet reading a file on a person, and actually seeing with

your own eyes the way they live are too completely different things. His room was a mess, more cluttered than dirty, and there was some evidence that he attempted to clean on at least a semi regular basis. Dirty laundry was piled high into a blue plastic basket, somewhat resembling the Leaning Tower of Pisa as the top of the stack was pulled by gravity dangerously to the left, and stacks of neatly folded clean clothes dotted the carpeted floor. Pushed into the corner Cortana saw a laundry bag, and from its simplistic and utilitarian design she could tell that it was military issued. On it were the words 'Laundry # D-1588'.

She knew that he could have graduated from any college he wanted, but chose not to for reasons that were beyond even him, and what Cortana saw as she entered his bedroom made her wonder what had possessed him to make that decision. There were books stacked everywhere. Some on an old wooden bookshelf with a dark finish whose stability was questionable, others in crooked piles on his dresser, and when Cortana opened a drawer which ran underneath his queen sized bed she found yet more. More than she believed any one person could own. There was not a dozen books, or several dozen. By Cortana's count the writer had to own at least a hundred, if not more. The ones underneath his bed were all novels, some of the paperbacks so worn out from reading that they were about to fall apart, white cracks running along their spines. The ones on the bookshelf and the dresser however were nonfiction. History books, some college level textbooks, and Cortana read the names off of some of them. 'Decision in Normandy, The Fall of Berlin, Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad, Rommel's War in Africa, Vietnam a History, Pickett's Charge: The Last Attack at Gettysburg, 1776' Cortana paused at the title of this book and did the math in her head.

$-1+7+7+6=19$

She shook her head and turned her attention to the T.V., her eyes quickly drifting to the X-Box hooked up underneath, and then to the video games stacked in front of the console. To her relief she found that he did not own nineteen games, but as she inspected further she saw that two games had been set aside from the stack. One, Halo 4, Cortana was very familiar with and was not surprised to see that the writer played it often, or at least recently, although her eyes lingered on John's picture on the front of the box. The other game, however peaked her interest. 'A western,' Cortana thought. 'Maybe he was playing this one for inspiration.' She picked up the game and read the title.

ROCKSTAR GAMES PRESENTS

RED DEAD REDEMPTION

Cortana flipped the game over and read the description on the back.

'America, 1911. The Wild West is dying. When Federal agents threaten his family, former outlaw John Marston'

Cortana stopped reading immediately and flung the game against the wall, the box creating a loud smack as it hit the drywall. From beyond the doorway leading to the rest of the house Roland's voice called out, "What's wrong?"

"Nineteen," Cortana said, standing up. "That's what's wrong." She stood up, and as she did something on top of the shelf besides the T.V. caught her eye. "Roland come in here." The gunslinger came quickly, his boots clicking audibly on the tile outside the bedroom. He walked up behind her and his eyes went to what Cortana was looking at. It was a small blood red box, perhaps eight inches in length, two inches in height, and three inches in width. Printed on top of the box was a yellow banner with gold trim surrounded by ten pink roses. On the banner were the words 'Rose Garden: Jardin Des Roses'. Next to the banner and the roses in gold lettering and a flowing cursive font were the words 'Luxury Perfumed Soap' and above that the words 'Prestige by Celebrity'. Cortana added up the letters in those last set of words. They added up to nineteen. Always it was nineteen. She picked up the box and it was heavier than Cortana expected the distinct jingling of coins emanating from inside the box. Her heart began to beat unexpectedly faster as she removed the lid, and as she peered inside her suspicions were confirmed.

"Quarters," Roland said, picking one up from the box. "Why does he have so many?"

Cortana took one of the quarters out of the box and flipped it over. One the back was the engraved image of a drummer dressed in the uniform of the Continental Army, his eyes looking off in the distance and his face proud and stoic. "They are bicentennial quarters, minted to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence." Roland arched and eyebrow and Cortana clarified for him, "The founding of the United States of America." Roland nodded and Cortana placed the lid back on the box, treating it much more gently then she had the game as she put it back on the shelf. Also on the shelf were more books, Stephen King and J.K. Rowling predominantly represented, and the Halo novels strangely absent. What caught her attention most, however, were the seven nonfiction books grouped together. They were all a faded jet black, the pages which were a discolored yellow, brown, and amber red marking their age. Cortana picked one out and read the title.

AUDELS CARPENTERS AND BUILDERS GUIDE VOL. 2

Builders Mathematics, Drawing Plans, Specifications, Estimating

She flipped through the pages which were thin and fragile and found that the copyright date was 1923. "He seems to be fond of collecting things," Cortana said. She flipped back a few pages and found a quote written on the third page. Her eyes moved from left to right as she read it, and the page was covered in shadow as the gunslinger moved up behind her.

"Can you read it for me?"

"Iâ€|" Cortana said, looking at the name at the bottom of the paragraph. She nodded her head, "Okay." She began to read, "When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for present delight nor for present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for; and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substance of them, 'See! This our father did for us.'" She closed her eyes and her hand like it had so often done in the days after her Spartan's death and like it would do

in the months that would follow went to her stomach, "John Ruskin." She felt a rough hand on her shoulder, and turned around to look at Roland, "He might not have said that, but it fits him."

"I know," Roland said. His head suddenly turned, and in the distance Cortana could hear the main door to the house opening on its hinges. The gunslinger dropped his hand from her shoulder, "He's here."

66. Chapter 66

Chapter 66: Cor Tenebrae

This is me

This is me as I once was and as I am

This is my story

Will ya hear it?

â€|

He was born in the Baltimore of 1990

1+9+9+0=19

â€|

He is only seventeen

This is the year of his first car accident. He is driving down a two lane country road in the middle of August, the sun reflecting off of the windshield of his blue Jeep Wrangler. If one were to see it now they would say that it is similar to John Cullum's army green Jeep, and they would be right. There is a dent just above the right front tire, and it has a failing clutch. But he loves this car, loves it more than any other car he will own or drive after this day, because this is his first car, and first loves always hold a special place in men's hearts. He is driving to varsity football practice, the days of autumn and the smell of grass under the Friday lights in his high school football stadium still eons away in his mind. He flips on the turn signal and as he pops the clutch into neutral he bends over to adjust the radio. His hears are filled with a screeching static, and it is not until he smells the burning rubber and feels his body lurch forward against the seatbelt that he realizes it is not the radio making that noise. Dazed, confused, disoriented, worried more about what his father will say and about being late to practice than about his own physical safety and that of the person who hit him. He is still just a kid, a squatter in a man's body, and he gives little thought to practical things. Without looking at the road ahead he goes to open the door. It sticks, and he curses under his breath as he pushes his shoulder against it. Just as the lock releases and he goes to step out of the Jeep a yellow pickup truck, the driver with a phone jacked up to his ear. It flies by and the writer can almost feel the acceleration and the pull of the engine as the truck passes him. He shakes his head and steps out, still more worried about telling his dad and his coach about the accident than about his own safety.

This is the year he injures his ankle, and he misses playing on first string because of it, relegated to the sidelines for weeks standing impotently with a pair of crutches. This is the year he asks the girl he has had a crush on since sophomore year to go out with him. She says no, and he asks again, and again, and again. He asks more times than either of them can keep track until finally, more out of exasperation than willingness, she agrees to go on a date with him, and then another, and then another. She will become his first love, and perhaps his only love.

He is only seventeen

â€|

He is only eighteen

This is the year he reads his first Stephen King novel. The book is titled IT, and for reasons he cannot explain, not yet anyway, he thinks of Halo and of Spartans as he reads it. The writer thinks this thought is ridiculous of course. If two things were never meant to be crossed together it would be Stephen King and Halo. There is simply no way it could work. Yet, he cannot get the idea out of his mind, no matter how hard he tries. Perhaps it is because the monster in the book, who often takes the form of Pennywise the Dancing Clown, reminds him so much of the Gravemind. Again, on the surface this is ridiculous, but as he digs deeper he finds there are some glaring similarities that cannot be overlooked. Both are motivated by a ravenous hunger that consumes all in their path, both absorb the memories of those they consume, and both in their own ways are exceedingly frightening. He flips back to the first chapter of the novel, and notices without much surprise (although he probably should have been surprised) that the title is After the Flood (1957). There is something else, something that he will not notice until several years later. The chapter begins on page 3.

1+9+5+7-3=19

He flips to the second page of the book, where all the novels Stephen King has written are listed. His eyes fall on one in particular, a book called The Gunslinger. He wonders why Stephen King of all people would decide to write a western, but decides to check it out nonetheless.

This is the year of long marches, of more pushups than he could ever possibly count, of puking his guts out while three men yell at him. This is the year he learns how to properly fold his clothes, to make his bed, to polish and shine until he can see his face reflecting back at him. He learns how to clean and care for his weapon, to enjoy the kick of the rifle against his shoulder as he hits a target down range. Of hearing his combat boots echo against the mountains as he marches along a forgotten dirt road.

This is the year he sees John Evans die

He is only eighteen.

God help me he was only eighteen.

â€|

He is only nineteen.

This is the year he asks his girlfriend, the same one he had a crush on in high school, the same one he was so persistent in asking out, to marry him. This time he does not need to ask more than once. She says yes and they move in together, and it gets to the point where neither can sleep unless the other is in bed. She has read the Dark Tower series like he has, and says that he reminds her of Roland Deschain. He does not see it, will never see it, but perhaps she thinks that because like the gunslinger the writer is a hard man to love.

This is the year he first starts to work in heavy construction with his father, and on the first day with the dry dust swirling around him like a sand storm his mind is elsewhere and he is not paying attention. A yellow and black loader, its bucket and teeth in the ground and driving backwards grading the erosion pond, the first of many, heads towards him. The writer is not paying attention, his body the only physical thing holding him by the roots in this world, and a hand grabs his shoulder and pulls him away just in time. He turns around and sees the face of his father, a man whose white skin has been stained a permanent brown by a lifetime in the sun and dirt.

"What the hell were you thinking?" his father asks him. He hates it when his father asks him this, because the writer's answer is always the same.

"I don't know." (Spartans, Gunslingers. Cortana in the desert) "I don't know."

His father points a finger at him, and the writer can see his face reflected in the dark black sunglasses he has on his face, "You think those operators give a damn about you? Right now you are on the bottom of the totem pole in the company, and I don't give a damn whose son you are. If I ever see you do something stupid like that again I'll fire you myself. Understood?"

"Yes," the writer says, and his father looks at him expectantly. He sighs, "Yes sir."

He works on a dirt crew that first summer and he works his way up to operation one of the quarry trucks. The beds will flip over on a dime, and he sees several of the quarry trucks laying on their sides, including his own, as the months wear on. But he does not care, because he loves his job, loves coming home dirty and seeing the red and yellow soil wash off his body in the shower and circle around the drain.

This is the year he begins coughing up blood, but waits until he begins to throw up the dark red liquid in the middle of the night before he goes to the emergency room. They pump his stomach out, and he nearly throws up again despite the tube running down his throat as he sees the blood running out of his stomach through the clear plastic. The doctors tell him that he has a severe case of strep throat and that he developed a cut in his esophagus which bled into his stomach. This does not make much sense to him, because he was tested for strep throat less than a week earlier and it came back negative.

He is only nineteen

â€|

He is only twenty

This is the year of his second car accident which occurs on the same road as his first, for ka is a wheel do ya not kennit? This time he is driving a red Ford pickup truck, driving home from the dump, the radio alternating between classic rock and country. He does not see the accident itself, but wakes up with his truck facing the opposite side of the road from the direction he was driving in. The truck is unharmed, and perhaps more miraculously he is unharmed, and even more miraculously no one was harmed. He does not remember what happened, had not felt tired throughout the entire drive. But just as he was about to make the sharpest turn on the road, with a thick white oak on one side and a deep ditch on another, his eyes closed against his will. He walks around the truck checking for damage; still unsure of how he got there and how long he was out. After going around three times he climbs back into the truck, and drives the speed limit the entire rest of the way home.

This is the year he starts smoking and he enjoys the taste of Camel cigarettes.

This is the year his finance breaks off the engagement and moves in with another man, and he begins to drink heavily. This time no amount of stubbornness or persistence could save him, and perhaps they only hurt him.

He is only twenty

â€|

He is only twenty-one

The voice has become louder now, although still barely above a whisper. The voice is his, but they are not his thoughts, and not his words. They are about mid-world and the UNSC, about gunslingers and Spartans, about Cortana and Susan, and Roland and John. He ignores them, for there is another story in his head, one that he desperately wants to write, one that he knows he could make into a novel if he really tried. Yet, every time he sits down to write nothing comes out. It is right there in his mind, behind a door that is not even locked, but every time he reaches for the handle it slips out of his grasp, and so it remains hold up on the cusp of his consciousness. Never fading from memory, but never spilling out into words. It is not until later that he slowly realizes that his story about Volsogrod is something that he wants to write, and the story that the voice is telling him is something that he needs to write.

He is only twenty-one

â€|

He is only twenty-two

He is still driving the red Ford. There is a cigarette in his hand and the smoke trails behind the vehicle as he drives lazily down the

road. He is getting home early, his blue jeans faded and worn. The writer flicks the cigarette out the window and turns the radio up as he makes the final turn onto his street, trying to make his mind a blank slate, a foundation upon which future thoughts can be built. He drinks less now, far less than he did, but it is still too much. The voice is still there, and despite his hopes that it would become quite as he started writing the story; something that he desperately needed to do after seeing Halo 4's ending and the voice was nearly screaming into his skull, it has not. If anything the voice comes to him more frequently, urging him to write until the story is done. He wants more than anything for the story to be over, even though he knows it is not even close to being finished, except for in his mind. There, within the realm that crosses between memory and imagination, the story sits fully formed. Some things he does not yet know, but whenever he feels he does not know what to write something or someone comes a long and tells him. Sometimes it is a song, or a movie, or a review, or one of the reviewers themselves, or even a book. He knows most of the story now, knows how it will end, knows that John will die, but there is so little that he can change, because every time he sets to change something on purpose nothing comes out and he stares for hours at a blank white screen. It is only after bending to the will of the voice, Ves-ka Gan as Roland might call it, that the words agree to come out again. And there are some things about the story which he will never know. For he is not omnipotent, and he does not create. He only sees and hears, and what is not shown to him he does not write. Even now he does not know John's real last name, or what he whispers to Cortana as he lays dying in Algul Siento. One he will come to know, and one will always remain a mystery.

He pulls into the narrow driveway, and as he takes the keys out of the ignition he drops them between his feet. The writer curses under his breath and bends down to pick them up.

(They have come. They have come for you)

He sits back up, the keys dangling in his hand. It was there, just barely in his head and so soft he wonders if he actually heard it. He rubs his eyes and pushes the thought out of this mind, but pauses as he reads the mileage on his truck.

119117

He looks at the clock on the radio. It is 1:17 p.m. He pulls out his cell phone and reads the time on that. His phone says it is 1:19 p.m. He watches as the seconds tick upward and even after a full minute has passed the time on the radio remains the same. The writer shakes his head and thinks that this is just another thing he has to fix. He opens the door and steps out, the broken asphalt crunching underneath his feet. Joseph climbs the steps up to his front door, puts the key into the lock, and opens on another world.

He is only twenty-two

67. Chapter 67

Chapter 67: The Writer

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fredericksburg, Virginia

Joseph stopped inside the doorway, one foot planted firmly outside in the world of reason and logic, and the other foot inside the house where little to his own knowledge such things were now meaningless drivel, his hand still on the brass doorknob. He had no idea how long he had been standing there, but he knew where he had been. It was in those moments that he knew, that he was absolutely certain, that mid-world existed. That the ka-tet was real. That certainty left as soon as he passed out of the trance like state, but the memory of that frightening level of conviction always remained. As he stood there he felt as if his stomach had been picked up by a spatula before being flipped over by a haphazard cook. He also remembered the brief sensation of expecting the very air in front of him to be ripped apart and for his body to be hurdled into the darkness of nonexistence. There was also something else, something that concerned him more than any of those other feelings.

_John, _he thought.

Why was he thinking about John Evans now, all this time after his death? The writer shook the thought out of his head and all of the other feelings with it. He closed the door behind him and made his way through the hallway into the kitchen.

â€|

Cortana felt her legs buckle underneath her and Roland's arm reappeared underneath hers, having been lost to space and time as it moved with his unnatural speed, and propped her up. It was the chimes, the bells that echoed across the halls of existence, the tolls that rang inside her very being. Those beautiful, horrible bells. She wanted them desperately to stop. She never wanted them to end. Her stomach rose and sank and as Cortana looked at the gunslinger whose other hand was planted on the top of the desk she knew that he was experiencing the same as well. As quickly as the chimes came they stopped, and half of Cortana's mind rejoiced while the other half was filled with such unending grief that she had to forcibly shove and kick it back in order to prevent the tears from running down her face.

"Are you okay?" Roland asked, and Cortana dared not look at him for fear of seeing the same concern in his eyes that had always been in John's.

"I'm fine," Cortana said, straightening her legs up and Roland's hand dropped as she did. As she looked at the door to the bedroom she said, "He is really here." Roland nodded and Cortana walked to the door, only having to take a few steps, and grasped the handle.

Beyond this door was the writer. Beyond this door was nineteen. Beyond this door was the truth.

The truth. The agonizing, unyielding, undeniable truth.

That there was no such thing as fiction.

Fiction was a myth.

And beyond the door that Cortana now stood in front of was the living evidence of this truth.

Slowly she opened the door and stepped through.

â€|

The door opened and the writer looked at the contents of the refrigerator, his eyes moving to the upper left hand shelf where the beer was kept. It was a bit early to start drinking, but he figured that having only one beer before five would not hurt him. Besides it was not like he was driving anywhere tonight, and like Alan Jackson would say it's five o'clock somewhere. He grabbed the neck of the beer closest to him and quickly twisted off the top. He placed the cap between his thumb and index finger and bent it in half, a trick that his dad had taught him. Joseph closed the door to the refrigerator and took a long gulp of the golden brew as he turned around. What he saw nearly made him choke, and he had to beat his chest with his fist in order to get his lungs to work again. The writer held the bottle of beer up to his face, examining it, and then brought it down to look once more at the two figures in front of him. He went to place the bottle on the counter, almost missed, and a look of pure concentration passed over his face as he placed the bottle down with slow deliberateness.

Cortana examined him, her arms folded, taking in his appearance for the first time. His hair was brown, but his eyes were not light blue. The blue of his eyes was deep and dark, of the same color and shade as the northern Atlantic. Thick heavy eyebrows, a five o'clock shadow, and a small scar on the bridge of his nose were the most prominent features of his face, the eyebrows themselves giving him a look of constant seriousness. He was wearing a blue t-shirt, the exact same shirt that Cortana so often wore, and faded blue jeans which she also recognized. It was not until now that she noticed that every member of the ka-tet had worn those exact same pair and style of jeans, the only real difference being size. Joseph was big, but not in the sense that he was tall being only 5' 10'' (It was with some alarm that Cortana realized that he was not just a similar height to her, but the exact same height as her. Right down to the last millimeter). His father had once made a comment to his mother when he began working heavy construction that Joseph was just like he was at his age. Strong as an ox. The writer did not personally believe that he was as strong as his father liked to think he was, but his broad chest often illicited similar comments from the foremen he had worked with. His skin had the hue of someone who tanned easily, yet even with his brown skin Cortana could still make out the scars. She was looking for them after all. There was one on his right arm in the shape of a half circle, and five more circular ones dotted his left arm. If his shirt had been off and his right arm raised she would have been able to see the long scar just above his arm pit, and if he had been wearing shorts instead of jeans she would have been able to see the two running up his left leg. All of them were burn marks. Taken individually they were all small, but their sum total sometimes caused people to take notice and ask questions about them, something the writer never liked answering, especially the ones on his legs.

He looked at them, and they at him. If you had expected him to say something profound or poetic you would be wrong, for this is real life and the writer is a real person. Just as real as the two people who now stood in front of him. The four letter word that exited his lips was the first that entered his mind.

"Fuck."

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Tipping the bottle of Crown Royal forward Joseph poured the alcohol into the shot glass. Raising it to his lips he looked at Cortana and asked, "Are you sure you don't want a sweat shirt?" They were now back in the garage, and the air that wrapped itself around Cortana's shoulders was chilly, but not frigidly so. She shook her head and the writer shrugged. He tipped the shot glass back and swallowed with a grimace. Roland stood next to Cortana, the gunslinger motionless and quiet, content with allowing the conversation to unfold between Cortana and Joseph alone. If, that was, the writer would ever say more than a single sentence at a time. Other than making a comment about how if he was going to talk to them he needed something stronger than beer and asking Cortana if she wanted a sweat shirt, the writer had said almost nothing.

"You don't talk much do you?" Cortana asked, and Joseph nodded, pouring himself another shot.

"Talking is not really my strong suit. That's why I write." He brought the shot up to his lips and paused, "That's why I did write anyway. 'Other Worlds Than These' is the first substantial thing I've written in years." He swallowed, and this time his grimace was less noticeable. His accent was slight, and southern, and the writer himself never noticed it until he went up north. As Cortana watched him pour a third shot, swallowing it with no grimace this time, she felt her anger build. Clear, red, tangible, irrational anger towards him, the one person she could finally let her anger out on. The vampires that killed Callahan were dead, the man in black and Richard Sayre who were most responsible for Susannah's death next to Mordred were dead, and the Brute that had killed John was dead. But here, here was the man who had written and would write about all of it. Right now Cortana cared little for the philosophical quandaries of whether or not Cor Tenebrae was responsible for their deaths. Right now all that matter was he was here, and she seethed with internal rage.

It intensified when he pulled out a pack of Camel cigarettes and began to slide one out. She coughed loudly and Joseph looked at her, and then at her stomach. "That's right," he said and put the pack down on the work bench next to him. He seemed to be deep in thought for several moments as he looked at the concrete floor underneath him, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry," Cortana said and the writer looked up at her. "You're sorry?" She crossed the distance between them as fast as her legs would carry her and there was a loud sickening slap as her hand connected with his cheek leaving a dark red mark across his face. There was evidence of pain in his eyes, but not shock or surprise. He had expected, no he had known that she would slap him and had did nothing to prevent it, and this only served to fuel Cortana's anger at him.

"You killed him!" Cortana nearly shouted. She thought about slapping him again, raising her hand to do so, but instead let it drop to her side. Her voice lowered and her tone became monotonic and cold. "Callahan, Susannah, and John are dead because of you. Because you

thought it would make for a good story. I loved John and just decided to kill him off like it was nothing."

Joseph sighed, not looking at her, "I haven't even written that part yet."

"Then change it," Cortana said. "Or at least bring him back. You can do that, you're the writer."

Joseph shook his head and raised his eyes up to meet hers, "I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Cortana demanded and the writer's right eye winced. His father had always been fond of saying that.

"Can't. I don't make things happen I just see them and write them down."

"I would have thought," Cortana said, her voice carrying the chill of arctic tundra. "That seeing one John die would have been enough for you."

His right eye winced again and anger seeped into his next words. Not as much anger as Cortana, but still present. "Apparently not." He poured himself his fourth shot and slammed the glass down on the work bench when he was finished, "Why did y'all come here?"

"You already know that," Cortana said. "You know everything that happens in the story."

The writer gave a forced laugh that came out more as a sigh, "No I don't. I'm not a god, just some guy who writes fanfiction. Other than you slapping me I have no idea what happens, and I didn't actually expect y'all to show up." After he said this he knocked back his fifth and final shot. His vision became blurry for a moment but he quickly regained focus as he screwed the lid back on the bottle of Crown Royal.

Cortana pointed at the mud stained boots, "What about those, or the jeans and shirt you are wearing. You were the one that put them in the story."

"Maybe," Joseph said. "Or maybe I have them because you do."

Cortana gritted her teeth and each word she spoke came out slowly, "That makes no sense."

"I know," the writer said. "But you being here doesn't make sense either."

Cortana ran her hands through her hair, pulling at it slightly. Whatever she had expected, it was more than this. The one person that could give her the answers, that could fix everything, was either unwilling or incapable of doing so. She could not kill him, as bad as she wanted to. Would not destroy everything Callahan, Susannah and John had given their lives for. Even hitting him had not felt as good as she thought it would. The anger in her voice left and it hurt Joseph in a way he did not expect as he saw it leave. Cortana may not have known it, but in a way the writer looked up to her and to see her nearly pleading with him was one thing above all others he did

not want to witness. "Then tell me how the story ends."

"I can't," Joseph said exasperated. "I don't know everything, but I know that I am not allowed to directly intervene."

Cortana continued as if she had not heard him, "Tell me. I need to know what happens. I need to know if John is really at The Dark Tower."

Joseph gave her a perplexed look, tilting his head slightly, "He is?"

Cortana blinked, "You don't know?"

Joseph shook his head, "I haven't seen that yet."

Roland, who had been a fly on the wall throughout the entire conversation, felt his shoulders shift at what Cortana said about John. He watched as she looked at him and then back at the writer. Her voice became quiet as she spoke, "Do you know what he whispered to me just before he died?"

"No idea, and frankly I don't want to know."

"Why?"

"Because," Joseph said. "That was private."

Cortana looked him over, studying his features. He looked nothing like the Master Chief, and she had been relieved that he did not. Yet, she could sense, both from reading his file and from talking to him, that he was broken. Something had happened to him to cause this, something that ate at him even now, but like the writer himself said that was private. "You don't have any of the answers do you?"

"No. None that could help you anyway," Joseph said.

Cortana was still angry at him, but the bulk of it had subsided. She could not feel sorry for him, refused to feel sorry for him, and the writer was too stubborn to want anyone to feel pity for him. Still, this did not stop her from saying, "You were something once."

"Once," Joseph said. "But things change."

Cortana gritted her teeth again, feeling the ridges scrape against each other, and thought, This was a waste of time. After waiting so long to finally meet him the only thing Cortana wanted to do now was to get as far away from the writer as possible. Without speaking she turned around to face the doorway that had followed them into the house, and number of technicians and the four Agents waiting patiently for her on the other side. To the writer it was little more than a shimmer, something the mind could easily dismiss as an illusion, but as she walked towards it he stopped her.

"It's a boy," he said, and Cortana turned around. "I thought you would like to know."

"I thought you said you couldn't interfere," she said, hope briefly building inside her again.

"Other than slapping me I knew I was suppose to tell you. It's a loophole but I'll take it."

Cortana nodded, the fire of hope being crushed into little more than embers. Still burning but not nearly as bright. "Can you do me a favor?" she asked, and Joseph nodded. She pointed at the bottle, "Stop drinking, or if you can't do that at least drink less." She turned around again to face the doorway, "If for whatever reason you stop writing, I would rather it not be because of your own stupidity." Joseph said nothing, and Cortana had not expected him to. Silently she walked through the doorway and the writer saw her vanish before his eyes.

When she had left the writer grabbed the pack of cigarettes again and turned to Roland. "I know what you are going to do now. You are going to hypnotize me so that I forget this ever happened."

"Aye," the gunslinger said. "Until you have to write it. Then you will remember."

"Thought so," Joseph said, sliding a cigarette out. "Mind if I smoke first?" Roland shook his head and the writer grabbed a box of matches, struck one, and lit the cigarette. He breathed in deeply and let the long trail of smoke out. He took another from the pack and broke of the filter, handing but it and the box of matches to the gunslinger. He watched as Roland lit his cigarette, taking another drag from his as he did. "You know my ex use to say I reminded her of you." He looked Roland over and shook his head, "I still don't see it."

"It's the eyebrows," Roland said, letting out the smoke from his lungs as he did.

"Yeah I guess," Joseph said. "But I don't think that's exactly it. Overall grumpiness is more like it. Eddie says that right?" he asked, and Roland nodded. "Can't be one-hundred percent sure of what I see until it actually comes down to writing it, at least as far as the smaller details go."

"You know you can change things," Roland said. "At least some things."

Joseph shook his head, "But never on purpose. Whenever I try to do that nothing comes. The voice can be pretty demanding at times."

"It can," the gunslinger said.

Joseph took another drag, his features becoming thoughtful as he did, "I should have known. That you guys were real I mean." His eyes went to the far wall as he continued speaking, "I've been seeing nineteen everywhere. Street signs, addresses, phone numbers, license plates. Justâ€|everywhere. Wherever I look I see that number." He looked back at Roland, "And it's not just that. The Fiscal Cliff, the Debt Ceiling, the earthquakes, all those hurricanes, the wars in the middle east, the attack on the U.S. embassy back in September, Sandy Hook." He let out a low, desperate, pleading sigh, "I look at the world around me and everywhere I see evidence of The Dark Tower's fall." He glanced at his cigarette which was only three quarters of the way gone and crushed it into the ashtray. "Okay, I'm ready."

Roland reached into his satchel, pulled out a bullet, and began to run it through his fingers.

68. Chapter 68

Chapter 68: The Face of Your Mother

2:17 P.M., December 19th 2012 (Gregorian Calendar) Office of Dr. Catherine Halsey, Dark Tower Building, Tet Corporation Headquarters, New York, New York

She was old. Far older than Cortana had remembered her being. Of course from Cortana's perspective only a little more than five years had passed since she had last seen Halsey, while the doctor had experienced the passing of several decades. Even with receiving the best medical care that the Tet Corporation could provide, which was augmented by Dr. Halsey's own work with the company, Cortana could already tell just by looking at Halsey's heavily wrinkled face and the way her legs trembled as she walked with the crutch across the floor of the office that she had entered the last phase of her life. The office itself was small and cramped, with absolutely no windows to speak of, just as Halsey had always preferred it. There was a cup of almost cold black coffee sitting on her desk, the bulkier version of the UNSC data pad beside it. A fresh cup of coffee, no sugar or cream needed, sat half empty in Cortana's lap with her hands wrapped around it. She took a sip and enjoyed the way the burning liquid entered her mouth and washed down her throat. It was almost impossible to imagine that the last time she had been in a setting like this with Halsey her body was still little more than a projection of light, and that they had been discussing which Spartan she would choose. An assistant attempted to help Halsey into her chair, but the doctor waved a hand at him as she sat down.

Halsey looked at him and said, "Charles, would you mind giving us a few minutes alone?" Cortana looked at Halsey and then at Charles. This was certainly not a tone that she ever remembered the doctor using. Halsey had always been brilliant, but also cold and distant, even with Cortana. But, as the writer had said things change. The assistant seemed reluctant to leave but nodded his head and walked out of the office, closing the door securely behind him. Halsey picked up her own mug of coffee, frowned at the cold contents inside, and pushed it away from her on the desk.

"You look different," Cortana said. Stating the obvious was usually the best way to break the ice in a conversation, something she had found out early on when she started working with John.

Halsey raised an eyebrow, "So do you." As Halsey looked over her biological body Cortana shifted in her chair uncomfortably. "How much of your memories are still intact?"

"All of them," Cortana said. "Including my access to the UNSC archives, at least the ones prior to 2552, and I've retained most of my network infiltration abilities."

"From what I've heard you have a few other abilities as well. Things no human or AI is capable of doing."

"A few," Cortana said, but did not elaborate. She expected Halsey to

ask a follow up question, but for a wonder she did not. Things did certainly change. "How long have you known that John was dead?" she asked.

Halsey closed her eyes, more wrinkles forming on her face as she did. When she opened them she said, "Two years. His death was one of the last bits of information we have received about mid-world from New Mexico."

"Two years," Cortana said quietly. "It has only been a little over two days for me."

"I had hoped that I would get to see him again beforeâ€¦" Halsey's voice trailed off and she looked at her prune like hands.

Her gray blue eyes and Cortana's electric blue one's and Cortana thought, _Gray blue. Just like Susan Delgado. _Her mind wandered further as she continued to think, _Roland and John, Spartans and Gunslingers, Susan and Cortana. _She felt something stir inside her chest but quickly dismissed the feeling.

She was shaken from her internal contemplation by Halsey's voice as she continued to speak, "I know you two were close. Closer than I ever expected you to be."

"We are," Cortana said, half correcting Halsey without even realizing it. She looked down at her coffee, slowly turning the mug in her hand. "I'm pregnant."

Halsey's stare became fixed and Cortana could feel with some measure of annoyance the holes it was burning into the top of her head. "John is the father." It was a statement, but Cortana quickly seized on the insinuation.

"Who else would it be?" When Halsey did not answer Cortana felt the familiar anger build up inside her. She did not want this, did not want her last meeting with Halsey to end with an argument. But damn it all the woman had to push, had to insinuate, had to even suggest that somebody else besides John could have fathered her child. A part of her thought that this could just be another ploy, a test to see just how truly human Cortana had become, how free she was to allow her emotions to enslave her thinking. The other part of her did not care if it was or not. She attempted to relax her body, the muscles having become tense without her knowledge. When at last she felt the sharp point of her anger dull she asked, "If you had known that I would fall in love with him would you have allowed us to be paired together?"

"No," Halsey said almost immediately. "But given the efficiency with which you worked together I would have been wrong."

"Efficiency," Cortana said. "So long as we worked well together on the battlefield it didn't matter to you how we felt about each other." She shook her head and placed the coffee on the desk, no longer taking pleasure in the warmth it provided. "One thing is for sure Catherine; my son will not be a soldier like his father was. Not if I can help it."

Halsey began to drum her fingers on the desk. She was not really looking at Cortana, not really looking at anything. Putting all of

her attention back on the woman who had sprung out of her own mind like Athena from Zeus she said, "You will stay here then. We can give you the best medical care available in this time period, and I can monitor the progress of the fetus myself. When the child is born we'llâ€¦"

Cortana cut her off, "I'm not staying. Jake and Eddie are still in mid-world and I am not going to abandon them."

"Cortana," Halsey said, the motherly look she was giving her inciting more of Cortana's fury. "They can take care of themselves. You're first priority should be taking care of your child."

"And what would you know about doing that?" Cortana snapped and she could see Halsey's lips begin to purse. "You don't think I know what is best for my son? You don't think I actually did the research before I got pregnant?"

"You always do your research," Halsey admitted. "But having a child is not an experiment. You only know what to do in theory." She looked Cortana over, "And from what I can see you are still having trouble getting control of the more biological aspects of your body. In your hybrid like state you have no idea of knowing how your body will react to you being pregnant."

Cortana balled her hands up into fists in her lap, thankful that they were concealed underneath the desk, "I know what my son needs better than you ever will Catherine. He needs his father."

"John is dead," Halsey said slowly, in a tone that indicated she was speaking to a child rather than a fully grown adult.

"He is not dead," Cortana said, fully hating the look that Halsey was now giving her. The look that said the doctor thought Cortana was crazy, that she was still rampant. "I have dreamed about it. He is at The Dark Tower, and I don't care how long it takes me to get there or even if The Crimson King himself tries to stop me. I will find him."

Halsey shook her head, "You can't be sure that he is there."

"He is," Cortana said with a level of certainty that surprised even her. "All my dreams have been correct so far, and so is this one." She let the fists in her lap release and allowed her voice to return to normal. Cortana had not been shouting, not yet, and if she could avoid doing one thing it would be that. She closed her eyes, took in a deep breath, and let it out, "I need him. Both of us need him. That is why the White sent us to the writer, to put that idea into his head so that John would come back."

Halsey sat there defeated, all logic useless against the emotional torrent of hormones that had been slung at her. It was not Cortana's fault, not any woman's fault, and if the true nature of the multiverse was to be believed than illogic was just as valuable as logic, and by the same token just as useless. Still, she pulled out her final card, one she had hoped never to have to use. "Cortana, as your motherâ€¦"

Cortana cut her off before she could even begin, standing up as she did and nearly knocking the mug of coffee over onto the desk, "You

are not my mother Catherine. You are just the woman who created me. I am Cortana daughter of none." She wrapped both arms around her middle and looked down at her stomach, "and mother of one." She looked back up at Halsey who now looked even older than when she had first entered her office. A pang of guilt entered her, guilt that would grow and build throughout the remainder of her life. She would always regret this day, regret the last words she spoke to the closest thing she ever had to a mother. Now, however, the feeling was small and easily ignored. "Goodbye Catherine."

She turned around and just as she was about to walk out the door she heard Halsey speak the last words she would ever hear from her, "Wait." That was the second time somebody close to her had said that word. Ka was a wheel, and for the second time in her life Cortana continued to walk away despite that last desperate plea.

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Rolling the unlit cigarette between the two fingers of his diminished right hand, Roland watched as Cortana left Dr. Halsey's office. He wondered how long it would be before he could go a day without seeing the hint of red in her eyes. Too long in the gunslinger's opinion. He was wearing the traditional dress of a gunslinger of Gilead, the brown poncho draped over his shoulders and the modified cattleman fitted securely on his head, looking very much like the likeness of himself in portrait that had been retrieved from the doomed world just one day prior. He waited until Cortana was a safe distance down the hall before lighting the tobacco, pushing the door open to Halsey's office as he did. The doctor did not look up at him as Roland entered, her head in both hands and elbows on the desk.

"I suppose you would not put that out even if I asked you?" Halsey said and the gunslinger shook his head. Halsey let her frail arms drop from her head and raised her eyes up at him. "I've always been curious. What are your thoughts on the Spartan II Program?"

"That you used children?" Roland asked, and Halsey nodded. "It was the custom in Gilead to begin training as a gunslinger at the age of six."

"But?" Halsey asked. There always was a but.

"You made them forget the faces of their fathers," Roland said, his features hardening. "And that I cannot agree with."

"Of course," Halsey said. "Your society placed an emphasis on paternal lineage." When Roland said nothing Halsey sighed, "It meansâ€|"

"I know what it means," the gunslinger interrupted. "Do not mistake my ignorance of your culture for stupidity."

"Perish the thought," Halsey said dryly.

Roland's features hardened further as he took the cigarette from his lips, "The blood of kings flowed through John's veins. The same blood that flows through mine and you took that from him. Made him serve when he should have ruled."

"The UNSC was and is not a monarchy."

Roland nodded, "But from what I have heard it might as well have been."

Halsey shook her head, "You may have a point. If Lord Hood had been left to his own devices maybe our society could have become a democracy again. But with Parangosky and Osman truly running the show" She shook her head again, "I can see why the dark man's first move was to destroy ONI. There is only ever room for one power hungry dictator." She gave a forced smile, "Did you know that Osman was once Spartan 019?"

"No," Roland said. "But it does not surprise me."

"No," Halsey repeated. "Did you also know that the ship board AI on Infinity was named Roland?" The gunslinger raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. Halsey studied him, his face, his eyes, his posture, the wall of iron and stone that lay underneath that weak human facade. "You are a lot like John 117. You even care about Cortana the same way. I can see it."

Roland nodded, "I do."

"You know she is not Susan. She doesn't even look like her."

"Susan was smart in her own way," Roland said. "And if it was not for her I would never have won my first victory against John Farson's rebels."

"Then why does she remind you of her?" Halsey asked, truly curious. Perhaps in this man there was a way to make Cortana stay with Tet

"Because John reminded me of myself, and the way he was with Cortana is the same way I was with Susan." He paused, thinking, "But that is not why I care about her."

"Do you really think John is at The Dark Tower?" This was it. If Roland answered the question correctly, and if Cortana would actually listen to him, then the closest thing she had to a daughter could possibly be persuaded to give up this insane quest that could only end in death for her and her child.

"No," Roland said, and Halsey sat straighter in her chair. "But if Cortana believes it is so, then that is enough for me."

Halsey sighed, her tired body collapsing back into her chair, "You are like him. Too much like him in my opinion." She forced her body to sit straight in the chair again, leaning her head against her hands. A habit that had thrust upon her by old age, "I read the last book in the Dark Tower series. I know what you find at the top of the Tower."

"And I will know myself when I reach it," Roland said.

Halsey continued unperturbed, "You are older than a thousand years, much older. Older than the Forerunners or the ancient humans in my world. Older than perhaps even the Precursors that came before them." She looked at him, again studying every single feature. Could she see

it? Yes, Halsey decided, she could see it. She could see it very well. The dust of a thousand worlds trapped underneath his fingernails and the tread of his boots. And in those ageless ancient eyes that had seen more than any other living being in existence, could she perhaps see The Dark Tower itself reflected in him? "What are you?"

Roland gave her the only reply he could, "I am The Gunslinger."

69. Chapter 69

Chapter 69: The Dixie Pig Again

Time is a face on the water.

A woman sits in a long wide hallway deep within one of the most powerful companies ever conceived amongst the infinite number of worlds and realities. In front of her is a mural cast in the hues of oil upon canvas. Twelve figures, their revolvers spewing forth thunder and fire, charge head long down a sloping hill towards an army of thousands. Rightly juxtaposed next to it is another mural, this of a lone armor clad figure slaying the legions of undead parasites in the bowls of a once great city, the pinnacle of an empire now long dead. There is an energy sword in his right hand and a plasma grenade in the other glowing like blue flame. In that level of the Tower the war against the Covenant had been won on that day. In another world the war against the dark man, whom Roland also knew as The Covenant Man, had been lost. Two parallels marching side by side.

The Fall of Reach. The Fall of Gilead.

The Battle of the Ark. The Battle of Jericho Hill.

Yet how much time had truly passed? How can time, which flows differently in each world the ka-tet has tread upon, be counted on at all?

Cortana who now sits in the hallway, her hair once short now hanging dangerously close to her shoulders, has the body of a woman in her mid-twenties. Yet, she is only eight. Roland who looks a man of fifty is closer to a thousand years old, and if Halsey can be believed he is far older than that.

Over thirty-five years had passes since the founding of the Tet Corporation in the world that Roland and Cortana are now in, and yet for the ka-tet it has only been the passage of a week, or two depending on how time in mid-world feels like behaving. In our world, the world you now sit in as you read these words on the screens of your computer, a little over eleven years has passed between the publishing of Eric Nylund's book and the release of Halo 4. However, in telling the story of Halo they have traveled the stretch of a hundred-thousand years. And for those of you who have read my story since the beginning only a handful of months have passed. So, how much time has truly passed in those other worlds since I first began writing? Decades, centuries, millennia, eons? I cannot say. All that I know is that time is at once always present and always just out of our grasp.

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Cortana sat with her head between her hands, doing her best to ignore the two murals in front of her. The bench was made of cool black plastic, and as she leaned forward she could almost feel her jeans fitting to her frame more tightly than they had before. The thought of how she was ever going to get knew cloths in mid-world once she grew out of the ones she now wore crossed her mind, and she wondered why she had never thought of that before. Her mind was clouded, the matrixes of her AI brain colliding with the hormones and chemical reactions of her human one, and Cortana wondered if she had made the right decision. What could she, who had only inhabited a physical body for little over a month and a half, possibly carry a child to term and then raise it? Of course she knew what to do, but that is a far cry from actually understanding what to do. She shifted her legs and felt the crinkling of the Doritos bag that was still in her front pocket. Cortana pulled it out, running her thumb over John's picture, wishing that she had at least one photo of him without his armor.

_I need him, _she thought. _I can't do this by myself. I need to find him, for both of us._ She was sure that she had made the right decision to go back to mid-world and try to find John, but even with her certainty that he was still alive somewhere did not ease the feelings of doubt she had about herself. The clacking of high heels caused Cortana to look up and she saw Nancy Deepneau sit down next to her on the bench.

"How did it go?" Nancy asked.

"Not well," Cortana said. She proceeded to tell Nancy about her meeting with Halsey, her voice growing increasingly bitter as she did.

"I know you may not want to hear this, but she may be right," Nancy said. Cortana snapped her head to look at her. She was just about to open her mouth when Nancy held up a hand to stop her. "I meant about us not knowing how your body will react to you being pregnant."

Cortana sighed and began to rub her temples, "Of course she is right, and the funny thing is until today I never even thought of that." She shook her head, "I always think of everything. I don't know what's happening to me."

"Hormones," Nancy said, giving a small smile, the white of her teeth clashing with the red lipstick on her lips. "If I had to guess I would say that you were ovulating when you and John first had sex in Fedic."

Cortana gave a short laugh, "I was, and I knew it. I guess it clouded my judgment."

"It's not your fault," Nancy said, still smiling. "You are only human."

Cortana's next sigh came out like the turning of yellow pages in a book bound together by age and time, "Not as human as I want to be." Her mind began to cloud again and she waved an internal fan so that she could think clearly again. "I have a nose bleed every time I

create a portal. If Halsey is right in her assumption then I'm going to have be conservative about how often I use my abilities. I can't take the risk that it might harm him." She put her hand over her stomach as she said the word him. "I don't suppose you have a doorway to Fedic we could use?"

"We secured the Dixie Pig a number of years back, so you will be able to use the doorway there to get back to Eddie and Jake. I'll have Agents 1588 and 987 escort you there."

Cortana sat straighter on the bench, her mind playing the movie reel of her last visit to the Dixie Pig, "I suppose there are worse ways to get back."

Nancy nodded and began to eye the jeans that Cortana was wearing, "We can get some supplies together for you too. You are going to need bigger clothes for later on."

This caused Cortana to chuckle lightly, "I guess I'm going to have to get use to the fact that I'm going to lose my girlish figure."

Nancy smiled again and put her hand over Cortana's, "Just promise me that if you ever happen to find yourself in this world again, you'll stop by. Tet is always going to be here to help you out if you need it."

Cortana squeezed Nancy's hand back, "I know, but frankly I don't expect to ever come back here again. Mid-world is my home now."

Nancy took her free hand and reached into the leather bound briefcase by her feet, quickly finding the pocket she was looking for. The quarter she pulled out Cortana instantly recognized as John's, and she felt her heart start to beat faster as she saw it. "This was given to John Cullum by the Master Chief, who gave it to Moses Carver before he died, who gave it to me before he died." Nancy flipped it over a few times in her finger before placing it in Cortana's open palm. "But all three of us were just holding on to it for safe keeping. It belongs to you."

Cortana slowly closed her hand around the quarter and placed it inside her pocket, "Thank you Nancy."

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Hands that had been tanned a golden brown by mid-worlds sun scrapped a small hole into the black fertile earth just beside the Rose in the small garden in the middle of the Dark Tower lobby. She could feel the eyes of curious people looking at her as she dug the hole, put ignored them all as she reached inside Roland's satchel and pulled out the tin containing Susannah's ashes, the two sets of dog tags, and Callahan's rosary. Gently she undid the top and poured the ashes inside the hole, feeling even more eyes on her now as she did so. The rosary and Buck's dog tags went in next, but she paused as she held John's dog tags. For the last time her fingers traced over the three numbers engraved on them and for a moment she thought about keeping them with her.

_No, _Cortana thought. _If I find him, _she paused to mentally correct herself. _When I find him, I'm going to make sure he never

needs them again. _Still with some reluctance she placed her Spartan's dog tags into the hole and covered them all up with the black dirt. She stood up, wiping her dirty hands on the back of her jeans as she did and picking up the satchel, and walked over to Roland. He was receiving almost as many stares as she was, the people in their black and grey business suits giving the man with the cowboy like attire a wide berth. Cortana thought that he looked very much like the gunslinger he actually was. Her mind went back to what the writer had said, how he thought that perhaps what the ka-tet did in mid-world affected his life rather than the other way around. If he was to be believed, and Cortana was not sure if she did believe him, then the classical American gunslinger was actually inspired by the gunslingers of Gilead. The opposite should be true, but since her digital death when had logic ever really helped her?

She met Roland's gaze as Cortana came to stand by him, those light blue eyes full of the emotion that the rest of his face refused to show. "Will you not stay?" he asked her.

Cortana shook her head and turned around to look at John's statue, "If there is even the slightest chance that I will get to see him again then I have to take it." She turned back around and for a moment thought she saw a look of relief flash over his eyes. Indeed Roland was relieved that she was going with him, and he cursed himself for feeling that way.

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The supplies contained an entire box of MRE's, several freshly made sandwiches (what Roland called popkins, much to Cortana's amusement), several more boxes of the long colt 45 caliber bullets, four pairs of sweat pants with an elastic waist and a sweat shirt for when Cortana outgrew her clothes, and to her relief many of the snacks she had been craving over the past day and a half. She sat in the back seat of the black Cadillac now, unabashedly and without any guilt devouring a package of Twinkies while Roland raised an eyebrow across from her, the bags of supplies sitting securely between them. Agent 1588 sat in the driver seat wearing business casual which did little to cover up his augmented muscular frame. He was not as tall as a Spartan II, but still taller than the average person being around the same height as a Spartan IV. Unlike a IV, something Cortana was certain Halsey had made sure of, he remained mostly quiet throughout the entire drive. Agent 987, a woman with short raven hair and a pale complexion that was more natural than having to do with spending too much time in a suit of MJOLNIR, sat in the passenger seat next to him. As the car turned onto the street that would take them to the Dixie Pig, Cortana craned her head to look at the skyline of down town New York, noting the absence of two particular buildings.

_Jake, _Cortana thought closing her eyes. _Jake had to see that. He wouldn't have just seen it either, he would have felt it. Would have felt the fear and the panic that those people were experiencing. _She thought about how much time might have passed in mid-world, how long him and Eddie had been forced to wait in Fedic for them. It could be a few hours or a few years as far as Cortana knew, and she sent mental signals to Agent 1588 to drive faster. Either out of coincidence (Ah but there are no coincidences) or because he had actually heard her thoughts Cortana felt the car accelerate towards their final destination. It was another minute before the car slowed

to as stop, and Cortana quickly opened the door and nearly jumped onto the sidewalk. As she turned around she had to suppress the insane urge to chuckle at seeing Roland with his poncho, brown cowboy pants, and his black modified cattleman walking towards her with his arms full of bags. When the gunslinger frowned at her Cortana did let out a light chuckle. She shook her head, "Haven't you noticed the stares you're getting?"

Roland shrugged his shoulders, the bags moving as he did, "I'm never going to see these people again."

Cortana felt her smile, one of the few genuine ones she had in the past few days, falter at his words, "No we're not. I suppose it's a safe assumption to say that you feel more comfortable wearing that than anything else." She was not surprised when Roland nodded his agreement. There was the twin slamming of car doors as the Agents stepped out of the car, Agent 987 holding out a key to her.

"The building is clear, but there is still a problem with the smell so brace yourself for it."

Taking the key from her Cortana said, "After what happened in there I'm surprised that you managed to get in cleaned at all." Turning to Agent 1588 she said, "Have you thought about what I told you earlier today?"

David nodded, "Still not sure what you mean though, but I know I'm not going to forget it any time soon."

"You better not," Cortana said, looking at Agent 987 as well. "Either of you."

"We won't ma'am," Agent 987 said. "Knowing that the ka-tet is out there keeps the rest of us going."

Both Agents turned to Roland and David placed a closed fist on his forehead with Agent 987 following his lead, eliciting more stares from the people that could be bothered to look up from their smart phones on the New York City street. "Hile gunslinger."

Roland balanced the bags in his left arm as he returned the salute, "Long days and pleasant nights."

"And may you have twice the number," Agent 987 said, lowering her fist. "We'll stay out here until you two are inside the building."

"Thank you," Cortana said. As her and Roland walked underneath the Crimson Red awning that still blocked the doors of the Dixie pig from view, she looked over her shoulder one last time at the Agents, hoping beyond hope that they would not die beyond one of the doorways in some forgotten world. She nearly ran into Roland who had stopped just at the entrance. He eased the bags down and Cortana noticed that his eyes winced almost unnoticeably as he did.

"My satchel," he said. Cortana handed it to him and Roland pulled out both gun belts which had the blue steeled revolvers holstered in them. He strapped one around his waist, but held the other in his hand, looking over the combination of leather, steel, brass, and lead. "This is where I gave John his revolver," he said quietly. He

extended his arm and handed the gun belt towards her, "Ka is a wheel Cortana."

Cortana looked at the hard caliber, and then back at Roland, "Eddie had it before John. I should go to him."

Roland shook his head, "You were an-tet with him, therefore you should be the one that wields it next."

_Next, _Cortana thought, wrapping her fingers around the gun belt and taking it from Roland. As the tips of her fingers brushed up against the revolver's sandalwood grip the voice which had come to her so many times before and which plagued the writer even now spoke inside her head.

(My name is Cortana, of the same steel and temper as Joyeuse and Durendal)

Her hand closed around the loops of the gun belt tighter as she thought, _I am your shield, I am your sword. I am Excalibur, the sword of King Arthur taken from the stone. _She fastened the gun of Arthur Eld around her waist, the weight of it tugging comfortably at her side. "There were words that you had John say when you gave his half of Excalibur to him."

Roland nodded, "That will come later, during training."

His words caused Cortana to look up and her features hardened, "And what if I don't want to be a gunslinger?"

"If you want you and your son to survive then you will become one," Roland said, his words coming out harsher than he intended. _No, she needs it this way, _Roland thought. _I must treat her no differently then I treated Jake, Eddie, and Susannah when I trained them. I must if I am going to keep my promise to John._ Still he felt a twang of sadness at the glare Cortana fixed him with.

"I already know how to shoot."

Roland forced his words to come out just as harsh as they had before, "You know how to fire a gun. I will teach you how to shoot."

Cortana snorted indignantly out her nose and pushed passed the gunslinger towards the door of the Dixie Pig, placing the key into the lock. As she opened the door the stench of death and decay hit her with the force of a train and she staggered back slightly with her hand over her nose. She began to cough, and pulled her shirt up over her mouth and nostrils in a further attempt to block the stench. The inside of the restaurant was nearly immaculate, the floors scrubbed to a near mirror shine and the tables and chairs having long been removed. But that smell. The horrible scent of death, of bodies that had been left to rot for years before the Tet Corporation had secured the building. That stench would never go away no matter how well the building was cleaned. She felt Roland's hand on her shoulder, but quickly shrugged it off. "I'm fine," she said, her voice coming in muffled beneath both hands and the top of her shirt. She let one hand from her mouth drop just long enough to pick up one of the bags and throw it over her shoulder. Cortana took one last deep breath of fresh air, and held it as she took her first steps inside the building.

70. Chapter 70 Installation 04

Chapter 70: Installation 04

(Space/Time Anomaly) Fedic, Thunderclap, Mid-World

Eddie and Jake sat beside each with their backs against the hard wall of the long winding hallway, the one way door to New York across from them. It was Jake's idea to wait for Cortana and Roland by the same doorway that led from the depths of the Dixie Pig to Fedic, although it was more based on a hunch than his actual abilities with the touch. If anything, both he and Eddie would be in a place that their friends could easily find them.

_Friends, _Jake thought. _The first time all of us met we were pointing guns at each other. _The moment when he had first seen the Master Chief and Cortana in the forest just beyond the Calla seemed like a life time ago, and perhaps it was. Time is a face on the water after all. It was more than just his friends he was waiting on though, Jake realized, but his family. His father and his mother. Parents that did not seem to get along well, although Jake suspected Roland cared for Cortana more than he let on, but still parents. He had already lost two people whom he had considered as being a father and a mother figure, and as the hours ticked by with the slowness of days Jake felt a certain unease building. The boy was not ready to lose another pair.

"Okay, I've got another one," Eddie said, throwing a pebble at the far wall, an M9 pistol on his hip. He had decided that the UNSC pistol was something he would never feel right using, and now it and the ruger pistol were secured on Jake's hips.

"Another get rich quick scheme?" Jake asked, tossing a pebble of his own.

"Hey we are going to need to make money somehow when we get back, and I don't think I can put down cocaine mule and gunslinger as prior job experience on my resume."

Jake turned his head slightly towards Eddie, "But none of your ideas seem like they are going to work."

Eddie made a dismissive gesture with his hand, exaggerating the movement for comedic affect. His humor had slowly returned, more as a way to cope than an actual return to his old self, and from the surface thoughts that managed to slip out of Eddie's head Jake could tell he was still very much in the process of grief. Still, it was good to see him smiling again even if they were mostly fake smiles. "This is a good one, golden even. Just trust me."

"I wouldn't trust you with money," Jake said. "But since I don't have any go ahead and tell me."

"That's the spirit," Eddie said, showing off another of his not quite real smiles. "Okay so you know how what they put on T.V. is never like real life?"

"Yeah."

"Well what if we just took a bunch of cameras and follow people around all day. Film real people doing real things."

"Sounds boring," Jake said, searching the ground in front of him for more pebbles to throw.

Eddie shook his head, "No it wouldn't be boring. Think of all the things you can do with an idea like that. Like throw a bunch of people on an island and watch them eat bat droppings and stuff, or put a bunch of people who can't sing up on stage and hand them a microphone. Hell I've lived in New York long enough to know a bunch of weird stuff happens in pawn shops. Could put some cameras in there and film what happens."

"That's not real life though."

Eddie waved his hand dismissively again, "You're getting too caught up on the details."

Finding his next pebble Jake threw it had against the wall where it ricocheted off and hit Eddie's boot. "Who in their right mind would watch stuff like that though?"

"This is America," Eddie said slowly. "People will watch."

Jake shrugged his shoulders. Eddie did have a point there. "So what are you going to call it?"

Eddie rubbed his chin in mock thoughtfulness, "I don't know. Real Life T.V.? Or maybe just Real T.V.?"

"Reality T.V.?" Jake offered.

Eddie shook his head, "Nah that would never work. Doesn't sound right." He reached out his hand and patted Jake on the shoulder, "Stick with me kid and you'll go places."

"I'd follow you anywhere," Jake said. His tone was sarcastic, but the words were still true. He would follow Eddie anywhere, would follow all of them anywhere, even to the very edge of existence. Considering that their final stop was The Dark Tower, that outcome seemed very likely. His arm was cocked halfway back ready to throw another pebble when a voice came through the other side of the doorway that caused him to grin broadly. For a moment he looked his age, and not someone who had been forced to become an adult far sooner than they should have.

"Chassit," Cortana said. The door flew open on its hinges as if the very winds of ka had pushed it and Cortana came running through it with both hands and her cotton blue shirt over her nose and mouth, the gunslinger following close behind with several large bags. Both Eddie and Jake caught the scent of death and decay and mirrored Cortana's posture in a fruitless attempt to prevent the foul invasion of their nostrils. In another life, and had the circumstances been different, Eddie might have made a crack about somebody dying in there. A member of the ka-tet had died there though, Callahan giving up his life to buy Jake enough time to escape. Roland elbowed the door behind him and it slammed shut. Cortana removed her hands and shirt from her face and breathed in a grateful gulp of fresh air.

The smile she gave Jake and Eddie was weak but sincere, "We brought lunch."

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There was the sharp metallic crinkling of tinfoil as the gunslinger reached his disfigured right hand into the bag containing the sandwiches. They sat in a circle as they always did in the same order as they had when the ka-tet held their first palaver on the plank wood stage in the Calla, and Cortana could not help but notice the three empty spots that stuck out like gaping wounds in the circle. It was as if the remainder of the ka-tet was still saving those spots for their rightful owners, and it was Cortana's sincerest hope that they were not saving them in vain. Roland's hand found the first sandwich and he pulled it out, one finger gingerly lifting the top slice of bread up to examine its contents. It was a basic ham and cheese combination, topped with lettuce, tomato, and mayonnaise. The mayonnaise clung in large globs on the underside of the bread and Roland gave a look of disgust.

"What's the matter, don't like mayo?" Eddie asked. He felt his stomach churned with hunger and reached out for the sandwich. Roland placed it in his hand still wearing the same look of disgust.

"Is that what you call it?" the gunslinger asked, and Eddie shook his head as he took a large bite. "It looks like cum." At this Eddie snorted hard with genuine laughter and chunks of ham and bread flew out of his mouth. He began to pound on his chest to prevent himself from choking. Next to him Jake's face turned purple and he nearly fell over to one side as he lost control of his body. Cortana sat there looking at Eddie and Jake laughing, but it was not until she saw Roland's stare of bewilderment, indicating his own ignorance of the joke he had just made, that she heard her own soft melodious voice join in. She placed a hand over her mouth to try to keep the laughter in, but it did little good.

Eddie eventually recovered, his body jerking every few seconds as another wave of chuckles hit him. Breathing in deeply he said, "Thanks Roland. I needed that."

"Needed what?" Roland asked, nearly sending Eddie into another wave of uncontrollable laughter. The gunslinger gave the ham sandwich a hard and distrustful look. If he had been hesitant about eating it before, he was sure not going to eat it now. Eddie looked down at his sandwich. He squeezed the two pieces of bread together and saw another glob of mayonnaise begin to bead up. He shrugged his shoulders and took another bite.

As Roland began to dig into the back again Jake asked, "What else do they have in there?"

Roland pulled out another sandwich and carefully examined its contents, "Tooter fish."

Cortana raised an eyebrow, "Tooter fish?"

"He means tuna fish," Eddie said, his voice muffled due to the food in his mouth.

"Never had it before," Cortana said. She reached her hand out and

took the sandwich from Roland who in turn reached into the bag and pulled out two more, handing one to Jake. Tentatively she took a bite, nibbling on one of the corners rather than fully committing to a trail taste. Her eyes quickly lit up, and Eddie could swear that he saw a flash of lightning arc across her blue orbs as she took another larger bite.

"Hungry?" Eddie asked, and Cortana nodded her head fervently before taking another huge bite that put the ones Eddie had taken to shame. He eyed the bag next to the one that contained the sandwiches which was filled nearly to the top with snack food, paying particular attention to the honey buns and Keebler cookies that were sticking out of the bag. "Don't suppose you mind sharing some of that?"

Cortana shook her head, "No that's all for me. I'm eating for two now." When she saw Eddie give another look of longing at the bag she threw him a smirk. "Of course if you ask nicely maybe I'll share."

"Don't suppose a simple please would work?" Eddie asked, and Cortana shook her head again. He turned to Jake, "You know other than Susannah I don't think I've ever met a woman who had good looks and brains to match."

Jake nodded, his tone of voice the same mock seriousness as Eddie's. "She can think circles around all of us. Remember how she put together that armor assembly together back in the bunker just from memory?"

"Yeah that was pretty impressive. I'd say even if she was only half as smart as she was beautiful she would still have an IQ of two-hundred and ten." He turned back around and flashed Cortana a smile, "Does that work for you?"

Cortana rolled her eyes and pushed the bag of snacks over to Eddie, "Next time don't try so hard. It makes you sound facetious."

"I don't know what that word means and I don't care," Eddie said, tearing the box of cookies open and taking a large handful before passing it to Jake. He popped one into his mouth and began to talk again, crumbs flying out as a result, "So you think the writer was right about it being a boy?"

"You mean do you think he was telling the truth?" Cortana asked, and Eddie shook his head before putting another cookie into his mouth. "Yes. I don't think he lied to us, although I have my doubts if everything he told us was correct."

"You mean about him being able to change things?" Jake asked.

"Exactly. I think he truly believes there is nothing about the story he can change though, so it doesn't really matter if he actually can or not, and I don't think forcing him to write something different would work."

"Because everything he writes has to come naturally or else it won't stick?" Eddie asked.

Cortana shrugged, "There is no way to tell for sure if that is how it works, but I think it is a pretty good guess. Unless what he told us is true. If that is the case there is a whole other rule set we have to consider."

"Because he believes that what we do here affects him in his word just as much as what he does affects us in mid-world?" Eddie asked, and Cortana nodded. He turned to Roland, "And what do you think?"

"I think what he said was true. At least most of it," the gunslinger said. He felt Cortana glare at him and could almost feel the hairs on his arm stand on end as if static electricity was running throughout his body. "But it is more than just that. If the voice of the White is speaking to him then he has no control over the story. He is only an interpreter."

"So basically he is just a middle man doing the White's dirty work?" Eddie asked.

Roland gave him a slight frown, "If you wish to put it that way. He is not perfect, which is why his mistakes affect us, but if he were to stop writing then the wind of ka for us would stop blowing. We would be left either not knowing what to do or have no way of completing our quest." He motioned his head towards Cortana, "She and John have already experienced that once."

"When Bungie stopped their story after Halo 3 and basically started dicking around?" Eddie asked, receiving yet another nod in return. A thought suddenly struck with enough force to cause his shoulders to shake slightly and he turned to Cortana, "Just remembered. Me and Jake found something you might want to see."

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Even with its long winding corridors that seemed to stretch into eternity and cavernous rooms that stretched out even further, especially those which lay underneath the furthest foundations of the Earth, there was no way of appreciating just how immense the complex had been until they were outside of it looking in. The streets of Fedic itself were a mixture of an early twenty-first century metropolis and a nineteenth century wild west boom town. The mixture of skyscrapers and squat wooden buildings jutting up against broken and rotting wooden walkways told a tale of two civilizations which had occupied Fedic over the millennia. This was nothing new, and nothing Cortana had not studied before. After the fall of Rome to the Visigoths the city had been reoccupied and rebuilt, eventually falling under the jurisdiction of the Papa States. The technology of Medieval Europe, however, was nowhere near as sophisticated or impressive as the technology Rome had been able to wield, and so the paradox of a newer yet less advanced civilization occupying the ruins of an older yet far more advanced one had occurred. The UNSC had experienced this herself, spreading its influence and military power into a galaxy that had once been ruled by two highly advanced societies with technology that even the leading human scientists could only begin to scratch the surface of. Connected to the complex in such an intricate way as to make it nearly impossible to tell which was built first was Castle Discordia, with a rugged mountain range whose sharp peaks stretched high into the murky heavens fanning out in a long line from horizon to horizon. That they would have to cross these mountains is not what concerned Cortana at the moment.

What did concern her was what was on the sign in front of the entrance to the complex.

NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS

ARC EXPERIMENTAL INSTALATION 04

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"Ring any bells?" Eddie asked.

Cortana nodded and slowly looked upward at the beam that was passing over head marking the path to The Dark Tower, and to John. "They were running experiments on the beams, trying to figure out how they worked." She looked back at the sign, "Just another parallel."

"This is not right," Roland said. He was looking at the sign, almost staring through it as if it were not there. To him, it was almost was not there.

"What do you mean this isn't right?" Jake asked, vocalizing the question they were all thinking.

"Iâ€|" _I don't remember this, _Roland finished in his mind. It was a ridiculous thought. An insane thought. He had only ever been to Fedic twice, and this was the first time he had even seen that sign. Yet, this was not the first time he had felt this way. It had first occurred when he listened to the description of what John and Cortana called plasma grenades, weapons that the Wolves used along with their light sticks and sneetches. It had happened again when Jake and Cortana had told him about Project Freelancer, and again when they had found the abandoned bunker in the plateau above Algul Siento. He had felt it throughout the entire duration of his stay in New York, a feeling he could only describe as reverse DÃ©jÃ -Vu. He did not remember, but how could he expect himself to remember something that he had never done before? Why was he expecting a memory that did not exist to be there? "Never mind," he finally said, garnering looks of concern from Eddie and Jake, and suspicion from Cortana. Sensing more questions he turned his attention towards Castle Discordia, its stone turrets and towers jutting upward with spiraling elegance, "We will need to find a way underneath the mountains." He glanced back towards Cortana before returning his attention to the castle, "This land is poisonous."

Out of the corner of his eye the gunslinger caught Jake shaking his head, "We can't go under the castle. There is something underneath there. I can't really describe it, but I can feel it. I thinkâ€|" He paused, his eyes flickering as he did. When they returned to normal he continued, "I think it's a creature from the Todash Tahken."

"We will lose the path of the Beam," Roland said, turning his gaze skywards. He let out a breath and his shoulders moved downwards, "We will have to follow the mountain range until we find a passage, and then work our way back up and find the Beam again."

"We found it once so we can find it again," Eddie said. "At least this time we know where to look for it."

"Mayhap," Roland said. "Distance and landmarks can no longer be relied upon. We have to hope that we find it."

"We will," Cortana said, and Roland turned to look at her. "The White didn't let me know that John was at The Dark Tower just so that we can end up dying in the wastelands somewhere. If that is the White's grand plan then I can't say I'm exactly impressed."

Roland nodded and turned away, again facing the castle in the distance. When he spoke next he addressed Jake, "What of my son?"

"Still a brick wall," Jake said. "He is blocking me out, but it's weaker than before. Still too strong for me to try and break through, but I think whatever Church did to him worked."

"Good," Roland said. "We'll sleep here tonight, and move out in the morning." He turned around and began to walk back into the complex. As he passed Cortana he said, "We begin your training at dawn."

71. Chapter 71 Prophecy

Chapter 71: Prophecy

_ Devil grass, one of the few things that grew in the Mohaine Desert of mid-world, burned bright orange with flickers of angry pulsating red. Cortana blinked her eyes rapidly in order to adjust to the light given off by the glowing embers. What she saw made her quickly and instinctively wrap her arms protectively around her middle. _

_ "It's been a long time Cortana." He was sitting across from her with his legs folded, the stick held in his hand lazily poking the fire. More flames shot up as a result completely illuminating a hooded face that he no longer bothered to hide from her. _

_ "I killed you," Cortana said, wrapping her arms around her stomach tighter. _

_ The man in black nodded, "Indeed you did. Quite a painful experience I must say." _

_ Cortana looked around, taking in the hard panned desert floor which cracked and broke apart even now underneath where she sat. A red moon was framed by a cloudless sky, the desert wind blowing gently, but not so strong as to cause the fire to flicker. "Why did you bring me here?" _

_ "I didn't," the dark man said. He broke the stick he was holding in half and threw it into the fire. "You brought yourself here, and I think you know why you want to talk to me." _

_ Cortana's electric blue eyes glared at him, sending her own sparks of hatred towards Walter over top of the fire that was in between them. "And what are you doing here?" _

_ The man in black shrugged his shoulders, "Waiting." _

_ Cortana's glare softened, more out of confusion than actual sympathy. She could feel no such thing for a man like him. "Waiting for what?" _

_ "For the gunslinger to chase me of course," Walter said, flashing her his signature smile. _

_ Growing even more confused Cortana asked, "But he already caught you centuries ago." _

_ "He did," the dark man said, his smile broadening. "And now I am waiting for him to begin chasing me again." He leaned forward, his robe dangerously close to the orange flames but showing no hint of burning. "Think Cortana. Use that vast intellect of yours. Think about what Roland said in Fedic." _

_ Cortana looked down into the flames and her arms loosened from around her stomach, falling to her side. "Roland has been to The Dark Tower before." _

_ "Roland has been to The Dark Tower more times than anyone could care to keep count," Walter said, the light of the fire dancing across the pearly whites of his teeth. _

_ "Why didn't he tell us?" The question was posed more to herself than to the dark man, but Walter answered her anyway. _

_ "Because he forgets. Each time Roland reaches the Tower he is found unworthy and is sent back to begin his thousand year journey again." He looked up and frowned at the red moon hanging on its hook in the night sky overhead. "I will forget to once the game begins again, but for now at least I remember." _

_ Cortana sat there dejected, Walter's revelation so devastating that she felt no emotions that she could take hold of and feel. "None of it mattered. None of it." _

_ The man and black gave her a look of such convincing concern that if Cortana did not know him better she would have thought he was being genuine, "Of course it mattered. Each time things start over we have another chance to destroy the Tower, and each time Roland fails the writer's world teeters closer to the brink of annihilation." _

_ "But time only moves forward in mid-world. He can't be sent back," Cortana argued. Her voice lacked its usual confidence and Walter ceased upon it. _

_ "You think the White is beholden to such arbitrary rules? The White does what it wills. I am sure you can see now why The Crimson King is so adamant about destroying everything so that he recreate things in his own image. Sic Semper Tyranus as some might say." _

_ "The White is not a tyrant, it'sâ€¦" Cortana began to argue again, but the words died in her throat and she was met only with the dark man's snicker. _

_ "Deny it if you will, it means little to me now." He reached behind him and pulled out a wooden box. Flipping it open Cortana could see it contained a chess set of such ornate quality that its beauty seemed almost supernatural. The finish on the wooden chess board shined with its own inner luminosity and as Walter began to set the pieces on the board she saw that they too seemed to glow faintly. Each marble chess piece was smooth as glass, bright Crimson Red on

Walter's side of the board, and brilliant White on Cortana's side. "At the end of the game the king and the pawn go into the same box. Catherine is fond of saying that isn't she?" He paused as if waiting for an answer, but it was more for show than any practicality. When Cortana did not speak he continued, "But while the game is being played it matters very much which piece you are doesn't it?" When he finished setting up the pieces he leaned back, cracking his knuckles loudly with the same effect as the crackling of the fire next to them. Cortana reached forward and placed a hand on one of the white pawns directly in front of the king, but looked up as Walter began making a tisking sound, "House rules. Red goes first."_

_ Cortana glared at him and gave the dark man her response, "Cam-a-cammal pria-toi Gan delah." She moved the white pawn two spaces forward to the center of the board. _

_ "Would not have thought you of all people would believe such things," Walter said, moving his own pawn and matching Cortana's move._

_ "It is hard not to after experiencing it firsthand," Cortana said. She moved her left hand bishop to the center of the board across from the pawn, strengthening her dominance of the four squares in the middle. _

_ Walter smiled at her move and slid his queen diagonally as far as it would go until it sat just across from Cortana's left hand castle. It was an aggressive move, ensuring that his queen could threaten Cortana's defenses but placed just out of reach of any of her pieces. "Now to what you came here to talk to me about," he said, watching Cortana move her right hand knight just behind her bishop, protecting her pawn in the middle of the board and once again strengthening her defenses. "You want John." By the tone of his voice it could have been both a statement and a question. Cortana waited for him to finish his move, again being aggressive with his queen and placing it just to the left of her pawn in the middle of the board, still keeping out of reach of any of her pieces. _

_ "Yes," Cortana said quietly. She contemplated her next move. The strategy she was about to employ was not one that she was fond of as it produced neither a gain nor a loss for either player. Yet if Walter's first two moves with his queen were any indication that piece was an integral part of his strategy, thus it had to be taken out early. She slid her own queen until it was in the space directly in front of his, protected by both her left knight and one of her pawns._

_ "Well you shall not have him. You were never meant to have him," the dark man said, sitting up straighter and making a show of thinking about his next move. _

_ "And why is that?" Cortana asked, humoring him more than anything. _

_ "The prophecy," Walter said simply, rubbing his chin and looking at the board carefully. "I have been waiting here for a long time and have spent a great deal thinking about it. I now believe that it was talking about you and John."_

_ "What is it?" Cortana asked. Normally she would have grown

impatient with her opponent taking so long to decide their next move, but now she was fully fixated on what Walter was telling her. _

_ His jet black eyes flicked up from the board and he smile widely at her, "That she who ends the Line of Eld shall conceive a child of incest with her brother, and that this child shall be marked, by his red heel you shall know him. It is she who shall take the last breath of the Warrior. Now I will admit to changing a few of the words but the essence of the prophecy remains the same." He turned his attention back to the board and began shaking his head, "Sacrificing the queen for the good of the kingdom. Rather symbolic don't you think?" He moved his queen one space forward and swept Cortana's queen off the board with a quick movement of his ghostly pale hand.

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_ Cortana moved her right hand knight forward and took Walter's queen, "I'm not sure how good your powers of observation are Walt, but John is not my brother."_

_ "Yes he is." He moved one of his own bishops out to protect his pawn in the middle of the board which was now threatened by Cortana's knight. "And you know he is," the man in black said, and Cortana, may the gods and the Man Jesus help her, did know. "What do you call a man who shares the same mother as you? And Catherine is the closest thing to a mother that either of you have." He began to rub his chin again as he watched Cortana move another pawn forward, effectively throwing up a defensive wall in front of her king. "You do look remarkably like Catherine did when she was younger. An Oedipus Complex if I have ever seen one."_

_ "You're sick," Cortana said, her cheeks flushing red as her voice rose. _

_ Walter chuckled lightly as he moved his left hand knight into position to strengthen his own hold on the center of the board, "I am not the one who fulfilled the prophecy. Is fulfilling the prophecy. He never did tell you he loved you did he, even while he was dying? I guess all his love had been given long ago to the mother you both share."_

_ "Shut up," Cortana said angrily, and she felt a sharp snap of electricity arc between two of her fingers. She moved her right bishop in a far more aggressive manner than she had originally intended, placing it on the far left flank of the board to threaten the dark man's king. She attempted to calm her breathing which had risen dramatically without her knowledge. After only achieving partial success she made her argument against the prophecy, "Mordred was born with a red mark on his heel, so the prophesy can't be talking about me and John."_

_ Walter nodded, "Indeed he does, but did you not notice how similar Mordred looks to the vision of your son I showed you during our first palaver?" The fallen look in Cortana's eyes gave the man in black the answer he needed, "The dark black hair of his mother and the light blue eyes of his father. Mordred is your son's twim."_

_ "My son is nothing like Mordred," Cortana retorted, her breathing rising yet again and more blood rushing to her face. Now she was impatient for the dark man to make his next move, wanting take out her frustrations against him on the chest board. To beat him at his

own game. _

_ Walter shook his head sadly but his black bottomless eyes still held the smile he wore so often, "How do you know what your son will be like before he is born, when he is still little more than a cluster of cells in your womb?"_

_ "I know," Cortana said firmly. _

_ Walter gave a sigh of resignation and moved his left hand knight forward again, placing it between Cortana's forward pawn and her bishop. "It was your fault that John died. If it were not for you he would have never taken off his helmet, would never have been distracted as he held you in his arms. If it were not for you Cortana, John might still be alive. Don't you see? The prophesy is talking about you. You are John and Roland's doom, which is why you shall not have the man you love no matter how hard you try."_

_ "That is not true," Cortana said. Nearly all of her reason was gone because of Walter's words, and she hardly suspected that this was part of his strategy to win the game. Acting more out of anger than logic she took Walter's left hand knight with her own. The dark man gave her a look of disapproval took her knight with his pawn. Cortana sat there, momentarily at a loss. That was not a move she would have ever made if she was in her right state of mind. By all rights she should be wiping the floor with Walter all across the chess board. He had tricked her though, used her own anger to goad her into making a foolish move. Now one of her knights was gone and her other knight was being threatened by a mere pawn. With no other choice she moved her remaining knight out of the way towards the right flank of the board. Within a few moves the dark man had all but disintegrated her hold on the center of the board. If one were to look at it now they would say that both her and the dark man were tied, but they would be wrong. Cortana knew that for now at least she was losing. Again she tried to control her breathing, this time with much more success. Feeling the heat leave her cheeks she looked Walter in the eye, her electric blue hues steady and calm, "I don't care. I don't care if John never loved me or if my son will turn out to be like Mordred. I love both of them and that is all that matters to me."_

_ The man in black tilted his head at her, studying Cortana, his focus on the game momentarily forgotten, "You give so much and ask for next to nothing in return, yet your actions have already caused the death of the one person you care about most. One would think that such selflessness should be rewarded, but ka very rarely works like that. Ka is only interested in maintaining the balance." When Cortana's eyes did not waver because of his words he stretched his back and began to rub his hands over the fire, the game now momentarily on hold, "I shall tell you how to reach The Dark Tower, although you will never arrive there." _

_ "I will," Cortana said. _

_ "If saying that you will makes you feel better than so be it," Walter said. "There are five enemies that will prevent you from reaching The Dark Tower. Two of them I am sure you can guess."_

_ "The Crimson King," Cortana said._

_ Walter nodded, "Although now he is the least of your worries. The

King has gone completely insane, has stretched his mind out over too many worlds for far too long. He is still powerful though. Like me he goes by different names in different worlds, and judging by your little rendition of the High Speech earlier I am sure you can already guess what one of those names are."_

_ "The second enemy is Mordred," Cortana said, her voice now calm and neutral. This tone of voice she used seemed to unnerve Walter more than her flashes of anger, and so she used every muscle deep within her force of will to maintain it. _

_ "Yes. He is still young and inexperienced, and for now he is weak. But he will grow, and his power shall increase until his mind is even stronger than the creature of the Todash Tahken that your people called the Gravemind, which you spent so much quality time with." He uncrossed his legs and began to stretch them as well, and Cortana thought it strange to see him act so human. "The third is the demon Leviathan."_

_ "Leviathan?" Cortana asked, raising both eyebrows._

_ "Yes," the dark man said, but did not elaborate. "The fourth is he who sits closest to the Tower now, and guards the path against all those who would try and reach it. The creature Dandelo." He began to titter, the noise grating against Cortana's ears, "I'm sure you shall have some fun with him, quite a sense of humor."_

_ "And the fifth enemy?" Cortana asked. _

_ "The fifth enemy is one that can neither be destroyed nor overcome, but instead must simply be endured. Yet, it may still very well spell death for you and your unborn son."_

_ "Who is he?"_

_ "Roland will reveal its identity to you when you wake up in Fedic." He turned his attention back to the board and quickly seized his right hand knight. He moved it so that Cortana could easily take it with her bishop, but only if she was willing to lose that piece in the process. "Now let's finish the game. You still have quite a while before you wake up." _

72. Chapter 72

Chapter 72: Finishing the Game

_She would never be sure exactly how long the game had lasted, for time as it exists in dreams is even more convoluted than the existence of time in mid-world. What she did know was that the dark man's pieces now outnumbered hers, that the game was in its final moves, and that Walter played far more aggressively than anybody she had ever seen. Perhaps too aggressively, and Cortana knew how to use that to her advantage. Slowly she had allowed the man in black to press forward through the middle of the board, crushing the defenses she threw up with impunity, and Cortana forced herself not to smile as she watched him become so focused on his attack that he forgot about the white pieces surrounding each of his flanks. There was also another advantage that Cortana utilized, one that the dark man had used as a weapon against her during the game's opening moves. He was

not only good at talking, his voice warm and tempting even to ears who knew not to listen to him, but he also loved to talk, and Cortana was perfectly willing to let him talk to his heart's content. Once again, for the innumerable time, he paused to break into another monologue. _

_ "Since discovering your world I have found it fascinating that such bitter enemies like the Covenant and the UNSC can be so similar to one another," he had his hand perched on top of one of his castles as he said this, but took it off and leaned back. _

_ "I guess I was wrong Walt, your powers of observation are top notch," Cortana said dryly, the majority of her mind that was not participating in the conversation, running through probabilities as to what the dark man's next move would be, and how she would respond to each possibility. _

_ "Come now Cortana, someone as intelligent as you must have seen at least a few similarities," Walter said, the light from the fire casting his face in an orange shadow. "The Covenant worshiped their false gods with the same amount of religious fervor as the UNSC who worshiped at the altar of the false light of science."_

_ "I would hardly call science a false light," Cortana said. She felt the familiar anger rising, unchecked by the emotional subroutines that she once had the luxury of possessing. With a mental kick she managed to force it down. _

_ "Ah but it is," the man in black said. The look on his face became almost that of a child who was about to tell one of their younger siblings that Santa did not exist simply for the enjoyment of it. "I suppose you have noticed that our little game of chess bears a striking resemblance to a scene in the movie 'The Seventh Seal'." _

_ "It's crossed my mind once or twice," Cortana said. It had in fact been in the forefront of her mind as soon as Walter began setting up the chess board, and every now and then the thought would resurface to the top of her head to remind her of its existence. _

_ Walter nodded, "There is no question as to the similarities. The real question is did that movie inspire our game, or did our game inspire that movie?"_

_ "I suppose you have a clever answer," Cortana said, once again adopting a tone of voice as dry as the desert around her._

_ "No," Walter said, and his answer genuinely surprised her. "I do not have a single idea of what the answer might be, and you see that is where science fails. It fails because science refuses to acknowledge that there are some questions for which there are no answers." He looked upward at the moonlit desert sky above them, the pinpricks of starlight shining even more brilliantly than the fire next to them. "You once said that the galaxy is vast, and indeed it is. But you were only talking about the galaxy in which you resided, which even within the context of only your universe is so small and insignificant as to not be worthy of mentioning, and when you compare your galaxy to the vastness of existence as a whole the result is near laughable."_

_ "That has already been driven home to me several times," Cortana said coolly. "What is your point?" _

_ "My point," Walter said. He removed his gaze from the stars overhead. "Let me ask you something, what is beyond the planet we now sit on?"_

_ "The galaxy," Cortana said. She glanced up at the stars and then back down at Walter. "At least a galaxy."_

_ "And beyond that?" Walter asked, a ghost of a smile appearing across his lips. _

_ "The universe."_

_ "And beyond that?"_

_ "Other universes." Now she truly was beginning to grow tired of the dark man's incessant rambling. _

_ "And beyond that?"_

_ "The Dark Tower."_

_ Now a true ghastly smile came across the man in black's face, "And beyond that?" Cortana opened her mouth to answer, but found she had none to give. Now she saw what the dark man's point was. "Do you not see? Size defeats us, and to suggest that there is an end is the one absurdity. There are an infinite number of worlds, all of which are contained in the dark pylon, but what is beyond them is an answer that nothing, science least of all, can even hope to give. Science fails on all accounts, especially when the multiverse is considered, for what is true in one world is not true in another."_

_ "There is one thing that is always true," Cortana insisted. "That there are other worlds than these."_

_ "Nineteen," Walter muttered, more to himself than to Cortana. "Yes nineteen is always true." He rubbed his chin and his hand gravitated once again to his castle. He pushed it gracefully along the board until it sat across from Cortana's king. "Check." Taking his hand off the castle he said, "There are two other sayings that are always true no matter what reality you may reside in, and this is a direct result of Roland's constant failure."_

_ "And they are?" Cortana asked, placing a hand on her remaining bishop._

_ "You have said them yourself," Walter said. "The man in black fled across the desert and the gunslinger followed; and Childe Roland to The Dark Tower Came."_

_ Cortana shook her head and moved her bishop across the board, taking out the castle that had placed her king in check, the move having the added result of threatening one of the dark man's knights. He frowned, and quickly moved the knight backwards to safety. "Now it's my turn to ask you something," Cortana said, and Walter looked up at her, once again distracted from planning his next move. "What is John?" It was not a question she would have ever thought to ask, not something she had ever considered, but on this night, in this

dream, all bets were off. _

_ The man in black shrugged indifferently, "He is the Warrior."_

_ "I know that," Cortana said, those unnaturally brilliant luminous electric blue eyes crackling with their own inner lightning storm. "I mean _what _is he?"_

_ "What is he?" Walter mused, scratching his chin. "As I have said there are an infinite number of worlds, and therefore there are an infinite number of versions of the UNSC, and an infinite number of versions of John. The story of one of them is being told even now by 343 Industries in the form of Spartan Ops, Halo 5, and Halo 6. Even more are being told by those on the site that the writer is publishing his story on, but as you have already guessed none of those versions are your Spartan." He removed his hand from his chin and placed it in his lap, "Think of your John as the mirror, and all the other versions of him as mere reflections. All of them are just as real as him, but at the same time not as potent, not as strong, for your John is the only one that is descended from Arthur Eld. You see Cortana, even with the vastness of existence warriors of John and Roland's caliber are extremely rare, and because of your actions Roland is once again the last true seppe-sai. The last death seller."_

_ "His death was not my fault," Cortana said, but the lack of conviction in her voice gave more of a rebuttal to her own words than the dark man ever could. Instead he chuckled as Cortana picked up her castle and moved completely across the board on the last rung of squares, only three spaces separating it from Walter's king. "Check."_

_ The man in black shook his head solemnly and quickly swiped her piece off the board with his own castle. Just as quickly Cortana moved her remaining knight, closing the second to last knot in her trap and took out his castle. Walter leaned closer to the board, and Cortana quickly came up with another question, "You said that the prophecy would mean that I would end the Line of Eld. What does that mean exactly?"_

_ Walter blinked, his eyes glancing up at her and once again away from the board, "I'll show you." He reached into his robe and pulled out the same deck of tarot cards that he had used during their first palaver. "The gunslinger's fortune is like none I have ever read. He required eight cards as opposed to your seven." His hands flew faster than even Kelly may have been able to manage as he swiftly shuffled the deck. He finished with a flourish and five cards jutted out of his hand, landing on the hard pan desert floor in the exact same formation as Cortana's cards had been in. In the center Cortana could see a man hanging upside down from a rope which was wrapped completely around his body, and surrounding it she could see Susannah's card; The Lady of Shadows which was of a woman spinning a wheel while appearing to be both laughing and crying at the same time, Eddie's card; The Prisoner which was of a man with a large baboon holding a whip on his back, the card of Death which Cortana assumed to be Jake's, and a card she was not expecting. This card was of a man drowning in a vast ocean. _

_ Cortana pointed at this card, "Who is that?"_

_ "Jake," the dark man said simply. He too pointed at the card and Cortana quickly withdrew her finger, "It is not the waves or the rain that drowns him, but the driving wind of ka." He pointed at the Death card, "Always he dies, and always the wind of ka brings him back by one way or another until he has found his purpose."_

_ "And that purpose is?" Cortana asked. _

_ Walter shook his head, "I do not know."_

_ "And the hanged man in the center?" _

_ "Roland and John," Walter said. "Here in the formation the hanged man represents not death, but strength. A strength not made from flesh and bone but from an inner force of iron will. And thatâ€" he drew another card from the deck, a golden sun setting on a field of roses, or perhaps it was blood. "Is where the sixth card comes into play. Life, but not for them." He tossed the card into the fire where it burned an emerald green, "Never for them." _

_ "So how is this supposed to show that I'm the one to fulfill the prophecy?" Cortana asked. She had little faith in the tarot cards, but Walter had been right in predicting both her pregnancy and John's death. If anything it was worth listening to him, and this time believing what he had to say. Perhaps then she could prevent something terrible from happening in the future. Of course, the amount of lies the dark man spewed made it nearly impossible to tell what was false and what was true. _

_ Walter's lips curled upward, that ever present smile as constant as the waves that rock the shores of mid-world's Western Sea. Slowly he drew the seventh card and held it up in front of Cortana. It was of a woman clad in a blue robe, white light shining around her being, black runes decorating her skin, and she bore both a sword and a shield with the symbol for Venus emblazoned across it. As Cortana looked closer at the card she saw that the woman depicted appeared to be pregnant. "The Empress," the man in black said. "For you were an-tet with John, and that makes you a sort of royalty, if only in the loosest sense of the word." He placed the card neatly on top of the hanged man, covering it completely. Cortana did not need Walter to explain the symbolism of this placement. _

_ "How do I keep this from happening?" She said quietly, and winced as she saw the dark man's eyes reflect the flames of the fire as he looked at her. _

_ "You can't. The choice is not yours to make."_

_ "I have free will," Cortana said, but once again her voice was less than convincing. _

_ "Would you sacrifice the life of your child to save Roland, or even John for that matter?"_

_ Cortana hung her head, and her shoulders sagged as she whispered her answer, "No."_

_ "Then you see the choice has already been made for you, and the life of your son is what you would have to give up to see that the prophecy goes unfulfilled." He paused and drew the eighth and final

card, which was the seventh card to go into the formation, for seven is a number of power. It was with little surprise that Cortana saw that it was The Dark Tower, "Unless," Walter said, and Cortana picked her head up to listen to him. He tittered, threatening to break into full laughter. "Unless the gunslinger chooses reaching the Tower over preserving your life, and this is Roland's great sin, the reason why he is always found unworthy when he reaches the top of the Tower and is sent back. Always he chooses The Dark Tower over the ones he cares about." He threw the card down and it landed neatly over Cortana's card, "And I doubt that his love for you will prevent him from choosing the Tower again this time. Roland never disappoints." He looked up from the formation only to see that Cortana was staring at him with her mouth hung slightly open. She closed it quickly but Walter still seized upon it. "You didn't know." He finally burst into full blown laughter, and it was all Cortana could do not to cover her ears, "You really did not know that he loves you."_

_ "No," Cortana said quietly. She waited until the man in black's laughter subsided, his chuckles seeming to stretch into the halls of eternity, before asking her second to last question. "Why have you helped me?"_

_ "Revenge," Walter said, a few more titters escaping from his mouth as he did. His hand drifted over towards his king, but he seemed to change his mind at the last minute and instead moved one of his pawns in a continued effort to press Cortana's center. "If you are so insistent in marching to your death then I see no reason for me not to help you."_

_ Cortana reached out and placed a hand on her right castle, preparing to spring her trap. "And if Roland does choose me over the Tower, what will happen to you?"_

_ "The same thing that happened to you and John when Bungie decided to stop telling your story." He sighed loudly, "We were so close to taking you out of the story forever."_

_ "It's too good for you," Cortana muttered._

_ Walter slowly looked at the desert around him, the nothingness that closed around both of them like a sheet of iron, "You of all people should know that boredom can be its own hell."_

_ At this Cortana's eyes regained their internal spark and her normal confident voice returned, "Then I hope your first day in hell lasts ten-thousand years, and that it is the shortest." With one last push she moved the castle across to the far right corner of the board, situating in the space next to Walter's king, which was now trapped between the rock of her knight and the hard place of her bishop. "Checkmate." _

73. Chapter 73 Training

Chapter 73: Training

The solid dark shadow stretched longer than even the tall man it was attached to as Roland stood over Cortana's sleeping form. Jake and Eddie had slept on the single hospital beds on either side of her and both looked up as the gunslinger approached them. Silently they both

swung themselves out of bed and began their morning rituals, Eddie shifting through the box of MREs donated to them by the Tet Corporation to find a suitable breakfast, and Jake pulling out a bottle of gun oil and rag and preparing to clean the ruger, UNSC pistol, and M9. Cortana, on the other hand, did little more than dig her head deeper into the pillow, causing Roland to frown. Before her training was complete he would make sure that she could wake up simply by sensing his presence, or the presence of anybody else for that matter. It would require her to never truly go to sleep, but instead enter a semi conscious state that would allow the mind to stay alert for the approach of any possible threats. This was not an ability that was easily acquired, and Roland would have to drill it into her, hard.

Cortana's head bounced off the pillow as Roland's boot connected with the bed's metal frame. The high pitched screeching sound of the bed's feet sliding back on the white tiled floor caused Eddie and Jake to do little more than look up before returning to their duties. Cortana, eyes still blurry and senses dulled from the deep sleep she had been in, groped blindly for the revolver which was hanging from the gun belt that was draped over the head of the bed. Her hand found it and she pulled it out of the holster, only to whip her head around and stare into the black abyss that extended from the muzzle of Roland's own revolver. The hammer was cocked back, and the gunslinger's arm and eyes were both firm and cold.

"Meet me outside," he said, uncocking the revolver and placing it back in his own holster. Cortana sat there motionless for several moments as she watched Roland walk away, her gun hanging impotently in both hands.

"Might want to hurry up," Eddie said, not looking up from the spaghetti with meat sauce MRE he was eating. "You don't want him to come back."

"Load your revolver up too," Jake said, causing Cortana to turn around and look at him. She looked down at the blue steeled revolver and flipped the cylinder open only to be greeted with the pathetic view of six empty chambers. "He does that," Jake said, watching as Cortana reloaded each chamber. "Might want to sleep with it from now on."

"I'll remember that," Cortana mumbled. It was an old trick, an instructor tampering with a trainee's unattended weapon in order to instill in the recruit the need to keep the weapon within close proximity at all times. Cortana knew about this of course, had kept the hard caliber within arms reach of where she was sleeping for just this reason. However, she must not have kept the weapon close enough to her own person for Roland's liking. As she swung her legs off the bed and quickly began lacing up her boots, the exact same pair of boots that the writer wore to work except being a smaller size, she felt the now all too familiar turbulence of nausea hit her. She reached under the bed and pulled out a blue backpack highlighted with black trimming, a white rose stitched in at the top. It was yet another gift from Tet, and Cortana pushed aside the camelbak hydration pack and grabbed the bottle of ginger pills. Popping several into her mouth she took a long gulp of water from the camelbak, which tasted strongly of stale plastic. Her mouth was unusually dry and had the combined feeling of cotton and sandpaper, but she resisted the urge to drink more. There was no telling when

the ka-tet would find fresh water again, not in a place like Thunderclap. The comfortable weight of the revolver met her hips as she strapped the gun belt on, and Cortana was not sure if both it and her jeans actually felt tighter on her than yesterday, or if it was just the human side of her mind playing tricks on her. Either way, in a few months it would not matter.

â€|

The first sense that hit her as Cortana walked out of the complex, besides the stale air and the utter lack of wind, was the smell of cigarette smoke. As she turned the corner of the building and onto what was left of one of the asphalt and concrete streets of Fedic, the smell dissipated and she caught the gunslinger grinding the heel of his boot into the ground as he stomped out a cigarette that had only been smoked halfway. Her stride broke halfway as she saw this, and her mind went full force back to what Walter had told her while she was dreaming.

_He loves me, _Cortana thought, and she felt a sensation she had never expected to feel towards Roland. Guilt, guilt for not recognizing it sooner, for not interpreting his actions towards her not as the result of whatever promise John had made Roland give, but because he actually cared about her. There was another side to the guilt though, one that surprised her even more. She felt guilty because Cortana knew she could not return those feelings, and that she had no desire to try. _I can at least try to be nicer to him, _Cortana continued to think, her stride returning to its natural pace as she approached him. Yet, when his cold light blue bombardier eyes met hers, another thought came to her. _That is going to be easier said than done though._

"You're late," Roland said, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Didn't know I was being timed," Cortana said, mentally wincing at the defiant tone she used. Being nicer to him was going to be hard.

The gunslinger said nothing, the hard gaze of his eyes giving the only reply necessary. He nodded his head down the street and Cortana's followed his gesture. Some three hundred meters away outside the remnants of what had once been a bar, or perhaps a night club, its glass windows long gone and two story roof caved in at the center, was a robot vaguely similar in appearance to Andy of the Calla. It was still moving, its knee joints and arms jerking with wild mechanical movements, the lower part of its legs motionless and feet that were buried deep within the dirt and broken asphalt. Even from such a distance Cortana could pick up the faintest trace of burning plastic, and more importantly the message that was being broadcasted on an endless loop.

"Girls, girls, girls! Some are humie and some are cybie, but who cares, you can't tell the difference, they do what you want without complaint, won't is not in their vo-CAB-u-lary, they give satisfaction with every action!"

The advertising message continued, before looping over and starting again and Cortana shook her head. "At least the Old People were accepting of AI human relationships, although now that I'm looking at it from an observers point of view I can see why some people would be

uncomfortable with the idea."

"John had always insisted that you were not a machine," Roland said, and Cortana looked at him threw the corners of her eyes.

"He was pretty much the only person who thought that way. Besides," she turned herself fully towards the gunslinger and away from the hulking remnant and memorial to a once great civilization's vices. "A human can't process thousands of thoughts per second, doesn't have a perfect memory, can't infiltrate a computer system just by touching it, and," she held up her right hand, "can't shoot bolts of electricity through her fingers."

"And you are worried that doing any of that might harm the child," Roland said, anticipating Cortana's next words.

Cortana lowered her hand, and the faintest trace of a worry line crossed her brow, "I don't know for certain, and that is what has me worried. I have no idea exactly how my body works biologically, or what kind of strain using my abilities will put on the fetus." Not for the first time, and certainly not the last, she wondered if she had made the right decision to go back to mid-world. It was not a decision John would have agreed with, and she had a feeling that if he had lived he would have likely tried to convince her to remain at Tet. Each time these thoughts came to her they were combated with what Cortana believed to be one undeniable truth. She needed him. They both needed him.

"Which is why I am training you," the gunslinger said. He gestured back at the malfunctioning robot. "Can you hit that?"

"With a rifle, sure, but with a revolver I doubt I could wing it."

"Try," Roland said, taking several steps back. Cortana hesitated, her hand fingering the sandalwood grip of the revolver. She widened her stance and brought the hard caliber up, leveling it at the robot with both hands. It was heavier than she expected, like holding several bricks at arm's length, and she struggled to line up the sights with the robot. From somewhere behind her Roland spoke, "One hand."

Cortana glanced quickly over her shoulder at him, "I can steady it better with two."

Roland's reply was firm and hardened his voice like the crunching of gravel beneath a rubber tire, "One hand."

Biting her tongue in order to avoid a sarcastic reply, she let her left hand drop and immediately felt the weight become almost unbearable. It took every ounce of control not to let her arm shake as she slowly pulled the hammer back. She put the sights of the revolver on the center mass of the robot, and gently squeezed the trigger. The recoil of the hard caliber nearly made her drop the weapon, an intense shock wave rolling up her arm and ending at the shoulder where it dissipated throughout her entire body. The bullet roared through the air, a caliber much too small to generate the damage she had witnessed it do on dozens of occasions. Yet, there had never been anything normal about Roland's guns. The round landed a meter to the left of the robot which was still singing its timeless

chorus, shattering bricks into little more than fine red dust as it impacted the wall. Cortana thumbed the hammer back again and fired. This time the bullet soared above the robot's head and flew into one of the broken windows, the shattering of glass indicating that it had hit several bottles of ancient alcohol on the other side. She fired a third time, more hoping that the round would hit rather than trusting her ability to aim the gun. Either luck or ka was on her side with the third shot, and she observed the robot's right arm being ripped off of its torso with some grim satisfaction. It had been just that though, a lucky shot, and not the product of any sort of skill on her part. She flipped the cylinder on the revolver open and reloaded, her fingers not working nearly as fast as her mind wanted them to.

There was the crunching sound of asphalt being grounded into even finer broken chunks as Roland went to stand beside her, and Cortana avoided looking up at him. "I know," Cortana said, resting the revolver in its holster and flexing the numbness out of her right hand. "So don't even bother saying it."

"You will improve," Roland said, and the quiet confidence in his voice was what made Cortana look at him. "You are a gunslinger. You have the same look in your eyes that I saw in John's. The same look I saw in Eddie, Jake, and Susannah before I began training them."

Cortana studied his face, searching for any hint of dishonesty. She found none. "Just how much do you expect me to improve?"

Roland paused for a moment, thinking. Seeming to come to a decision he upholstered his own gun, the blue steel shinning even in the muted sunlight. "Take out John's quarter and place it on the back of your hand." Cortana thought for a moment to question his request, but decided to humor him instead. She reached deep into her pocket and pulled out the quarter, balancing it on the back of her hand with the eagle facing upwards towards the brown tinted sky. Roland put both hands at shoulder length, separating them from each other as far as possible. "Drop it." Cortana did, the coin tumbling through the air end over end. She blinked, and never saw Roland's hands move, his body lost in a blur of motion. Both his left and his right hands worked in tandem, the left one aiming and pulling the trigger as he fired from the hip, and the right one fanning the hammer back on the revolver with an open palm. Six shots echoed from the revolver's muzzle with the speed and sound of a machine gun, and Cortana just barely the robot being ripped apart limb from limb. Two bullets entered his chest creating a massive hole of wires and sparks, one impacted its head which disintegrated in a heap of metal, one taking off the remaining arm, and the last two tearing the robots legs out from under its body. For the first time in thousands of years the robot went quiet, its ruinous form falling heavily onto the ground. A sharp clink told Cortana that the quarter had landed, and she scooped it off the ground without ever taking her eyes off the gunslinger. The cylinder of the revolver was opened, and three bullets had already been reloaded.

"You," Cortana said, not quite believing what she had just seen. She had known the gunslinger was fast, faster than John had ever been, but this display of speed was something that only Kelly would have been able to surpass. "You expect me to be able to do that?"

"With time," Roland said as he reloaded the three remaining bullets

into the gun.

"There is something I don't understand though," Cortana said, and the gunslinger eyes moved to meet hers. "When I examined yours and Jake's DNA there was nothing to indicate that you had any genetic predisposition that would explain your abilities. What I mean is that your eyesight, hearing, and reflexes which are on par with any Spartan is not something that is inherited. They can't be explained by medical augmentations either."

"No," the gunslinger said. "And that is the folly of your people. That you relied on augmentations instead of training."

Cortana put her hands on her hips, "There is only so much that the human body is capable of doing, and training can only enhance reflexes and the senses so much."

"Then how do you explain me?" Roland asked. Cortana glared at him, angry because she knew that he was right. There was simply no explanation, other than Roland's conviction that if he trained Cortana enough she would become as fast as he was in her normal state.

From the memory of last night's dream, the man in black's voice crept into her mind like an unwanted intruder. _There are some questions for which there are no answers. _The idea that Walter had been right also angered her even more.

_Be nice, _Cortana reminded herself. _He is doing this because he cares about you, and you need his help anyway, so be nice._ "Okay," Cortana said, her voice adopting a safe neutral tone. "What do we do next."

"Clean our guns," Roland said. "And then we leave Fedic."

Cortana blinked, not expecting the session to end so soon. "But we just got started."

Roland nodded, "When I believe you are ready we will work on your accuracy, and then your speed." He pointed at the revolver on Cortana's hip, "But first you need to become familiar with your gun."

"I already know how hundreds of thousands of weapons work from the inside out, including revolvers," Cortana insisted, the frown on her face deepened as Roland shook his head.

"Do you understand how it works?"

There again was the great philosophical question, one that had been thrust upon Cortana almost from the very moment she entered mid-world. The difference between knowing something, and understanding it. "No," she admitted. Her hand drifted to the grip of the long gun, feeling the sensation of touch which she had craved for so long if only so that she could reach out and touch her Spartan as she ran the tips of her fingers across the warm faded wood and cold blue steel. "How long until you think I will be ready?"

"Soon," Roland said. He looked skywards, and then at the mountains in the distance, there rugged peaks hiding the castle of The Crimson

King that lay beyond them. "My son will attack us at some point, and we will have to face my cousin soon. You will need to be ready before then." He looked at the sky again, and already he could feel the shift taking place. Hopefully she would be ready before it came, an enemy that even Mordred and the Red King had no hope of controlling in mid-world.

"You're worried about something else," Cortana said, and once again Walter's unwanted voice came back to speak in her ear.

_The fifth enemy is one that can neither be destroyed nor overcome, but instead must simply be endured. Yet, it may still spell death for you and your unborn son. _

"Aye," Roland said, still not taking his eyes off the sky overhead.

"What is it?"

The gunslinger took his eyes away from the smog and filth ridden clouds to look at her, and for the first time Cortana could see just how old, and just how tired, he was. "Winter."

74. Chapter 74 Regicide

Chapter 74: Regicide

Three times they had found water since leaving Fedic, and three times they had passed the water by. The first two were in stagnate pools, the water a brown and greenish mixture which smelled of sewage and disease, and the third a small creek whose pristine and clear current hide its deadly nature. Roland had given this water a single sniff before shaking his head. It was only until they came across the fourth source of water which was a small natural spring hidden deep between the cracks of two large tan boulders, that Roland gave his approval that it was safe enough to drink. Fedic had long since disappeared from site behind them, the mountains looming on the ka-tet's left as they headed in the direction that had once been south, the sun rising in the direction that had once been north, and their camalbaks and Roland's water skins were almost dry when they at last found the spring. For Cortana this was one thing to be thankful for, as they had yet to find a passage over the mountains which loomed before them with the impenetrability of a castle wall. She had grown use to her mouth usually being dry, although the idea that she could become dehydrated worried her immensely. Roland seemed to have sensed this, or at least knew that Cortana now needed water more than the rest of the ka-tet, and had donated most of his six water skins to her, keeping only one for himself. It did not escape Cortana's notice that the gunslinger rarely took a drink, if ever. Their rations were holding steady, supplemented by what Jake could trap overnight, which consisted mostly of small vermin. It was not without some guilt that Cortana received two MREs a day while the others only ate one. But when pride and instinct battled each other in Cortana's conscience, instinct always won.

They had stopped for most of the day in order to collect the water, using one of Eddie's spare shirts, his only spare shirt, to filter it out before boiling it over a fire which consisted almost entirely of devil grass, a narcotic weed that seemed to be able to grow in any

type of environment. There was another positive to finding water, one that Cortana was quick to take advantage of while they had the water boiling, and something that the others were immensely grateful for. The instant coffee provided in the MREs was a far cry from the first cup Cortana had ever tasted when they first met the people of the Calla, which to this day was still the best cup she had ever tasted or would ever taste. Perhaps it was because the first time is almost always the best, where untried taste buds experience the flavors and nuances with such a whirlwind of complexity that there is simply no comparing it to any future experiences. Or perhaps it was because instant coffee is never good coffee. Still, even bad coffee is better than no coffee, something the writer could surely attest to. Just like the first time though, Cortana experienced the consequences of drinking too much of the bitter sweet brew, and with little more than a word left the campsite to find a suitable place to do her business.

As she hid herself behind a modest formation of rocks which jutted out of the ground at sharp angles, Cortana took time to appreciate the silence. It had become almost a noise unto itself, buzzing in her ear like soft static. If she closed her eyes it would almost be like receiving no sensory data at all, an idea that both intrigued and scared her. Her mind craved new information, and the possibility that she could at some point be free of that addiction was something she longed for. To have one moment when her mind was absent of thought, something she had never been able to achieve even in her corporeal form. Even when sleeping she always experience dreams, from the moment she drifted off to the morning when Roland's boot would nudge her awake. And she always dreamed of him, every night without exception. She dreamed of meeting him a field of blood red roses with the Tower rising tall in the distance and a setting orange sun basking both their bodies in its warmth. In their dream she never got to touch him, nor was she able to speak a word to him, his image disappearing as soon as she took the first step towards him.

In her minds eye, her real ones now closed as she pressed her back up against one of the boulders, she pulled up a picture of him. It was her last memory of John's face just before the Brute shot him, his first genuine smile in years taking the form of a small crooked grin, a certain cockiness to it that she had never seen firsthand, but which he had almost certainly possessed when he was still just a boy. It had been as if decades had melted from his face and she could see the way he had been before the war with the Covenant began. The way he had changed not because of her, but for her.

Cortana felt a dull throb on her temple and reached up to rub it. What she found made her open up her eyes. It was a pimple, small but still noticeable to the touch, and the first true blemish other than sunburn she had ever felt on her skin. Her mind kicked back into high gear, running through every possible scenario. One possibility for the pimple's occurrence was the state of her hygiene, which had admittedly seen better days with her last shower having occurred in the morning before she and Roland left New York. The other possibility was one that she almost did not want to consider.

_Radiation, _Cortana thought, her hand dropping from her temple to rest on her stomach. _The Old People's wars. _She turned her head to the mountains which stood haughtily in the distance. _We need to find a way out of Thunderclap, and soon. _

Just as the thought left her mind she felt the air move again her face. It did not take her long to realize something was wrong. There had never been any wind in Thunderclap, and Cortana quickly stood up, pulling her blue jeans and gun belt up as she stood. The wind picked up, and it was with increasing alarm that she heard the faintest hint of chimes being carried across the breeze. Along with the chimes, the bells that toll endlessly with their horrible beauty, came a voice. It was singing.

(Song, song of the south, sweet potato pie and I shut my mouth. Gone, gone with the wind, there aint nobody looking back again)

Cortana shut her eyes and rushed through the UNSC archives, surfing through the streams of data with uncanny speed. When she took hold of what she was looking for she felt a slight cramp in her midsection, and immediately exited the data stream. It was a song from the twentieth century, and Cortana wondered why the White (for she was sure that was who was sending the song to her) wanted her to hear it. The song grew louder and it was as if the speakers of a radio were being held up to her ears.

(Cotton on the roadside, cotton in the ditch. We all picked the cotton but we never got rich. Daddy was a veteran, a southern Democrat. They oughta get a rich man to vote like that)

On the heels of the last word the bells blared in her ear, and the wind picked up until it was a ferocious whirlwind. It hit her in the chest with the force of a sledgehammer, and Cortana felt the air leave her lungs before she was sent Todash.

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12:45 P.M., January 6th, 2013 (Gregorian Calendar) Fredericksburg, Virginia

The closet attached to the kitchen of the house was filled with paint fumes, a white clock radio which told the time an hour fast playing the local country music station as the writer twisted his body at an uncomfortable angle on the floor. The shelves were freshly built, a decent sized project, and Joseph was nearly finished. All there was left to was paint them, white being the preferred color, and he had just begun to finish the underside of the bottom shelf when it happened. He was using a thin paint brush, contorting his body in ways it was never meant to bend in order to reach the far corner, coating the already primed wood with long determined strokes of his pain laden brush. His body shifted and the brush fell from his hand, landing squarely on his cotton blue shirt. The writer cursed under his breath as he picked the brush off his chest and inched his way out from underneath the shelf. It was his favorite blue shirt, and Joseph wondered what on earth had possessed him to wear it while he was painting. Accidents like these were always bound to happen. It was while he was dabbing the front of the white stained blue shirt with a damp rag that the thought came to him.

_Cortana is no longer blue either. She's white. A white aura with blood red lines of code. _The hand holding the damp rag stood still, and Joseph's eyes seemed to fix at some point in the far distance for several seconds. When the moment passed the writer shook his head. He had published the chapter where Cortana finally defeated Walter the

night before, so this could hardly count as inspiration. It was a coincidence, the writer decided.

It had to be a coincidence.

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Thunderclap, Mid-World

She landed on her feet, her mind reeling from the sudden sense of vertigo, and her legs threatening to give out underneath her. She steadied them, and brought a shaking arm to wipe away the sheen of sweat that had formed on her brow.

_I was there, _Cortana thought. _I was actually there. _She pressed her hand against her forehead, struggling to control her mind which was processing every minute detail of what she had just witnessed. _He doesn't remember that we went to see him. Why doesn't he remember? _The answer that came was at once both obvious, and infuriating. _Roland. _

She was so consumed in her own thoughts that had it not been for the crunching of rocks beneath the rubber soles of a well worn boot Cortana would never have noticed the figure approaching her. Her head snapped up, electric blue eyes searching for the source of the sound, the first thought entering her mind that it was Mordred coming to kill her. Coming to kill both of them. At first there was nothing, her human eyesight at first failing her. Then she saw it, a faint shimmer of movement not ten meters away from her. The figure cloaked in active camouflage flicked its wrist, the familiar flash of an energy sword forming. It ran towards her, brown dirt being kicked up by the figure's heels and the swaying of the energy sword being the only thing to betray its movements.

Cortana's hand flew to the long gun at her hip, her hands moving without need for thought. The figure was upon her, sword raised and read to swing down in a wide arc when Cortana's finger found the trigger and fired point blank. Blood splattered her face and the figure fell forward, a gaping hole where its chest had once been. She fell backwards as the body landed on top of her, and she kicked it away, the heavy weight of the revolver still pointed at her would be killer. What she saw was not what she had expected. It was a boy in his late teens, his jet black hair matching the battle armor he wore, a thin trickle of blood oozing out of his mouth.

Her eyes were still on the boy as she stood up, the weight of the hard caliber now all but unnoticeable. The roar of what some might mistake as a cannon flooded her ears followed almost instantaneously by the sharp cracks of small sonic booms as the bullets which whizzed passed on either side of her head broke the sound barrier. The first thing her eyes caught was a small lock of her own dark hair floating towards the ground, cut off by the tip of one of the passing bullets. The second was two more figures collapsing on the ground several meters away from her. Spinning on her heels she saw Roland, revolver smoking as he flipped the cylinder opened and reloaded.

"I thought they were Elites," Cortana said, eyes moving back to the teenage boy she had just killed.

The gunslinger shook his head, "No." Wordlessly he walked past her

and knelt down next to the two men he had killed. He picked up the hand of the first man, deep wrinkles forming along with his frown as he saw the sigil of the lidless Crimson Red Eye. He examined the hand of the next man, and when he found no mark on it pushed back the long blonde hair that was covering his forehead. There he found the sigil. Roland's free hand clenched into a fist, and then slowly opened. "Assassins." He stood up, the joints in his legs cracking loudly as he did, and when he looked at Cortana his eyes were filled with a low anger. "Why were you alone?"

Cortana clenched her teeth, but forced her voice to come out neutral, "Going to the bathroom is something people usually do alone."

The muscles in Roland's face tensed and he looked again at the two dead men behind him, "From now on bring Jake with you."

Her first reaction to offer a sarcastic retort was tempered by better judgment. Of course she should never be alone, not so deep in enemy territory. _I know this, _Cortana thought. _So why did I do it?_ The answer came almost immediately, _because I've never had to do it myself. _She looked back up at Roland, and judging by the way the anger left his eyes Cortana must have given him something close to a kind look. "Thank you." The gunslinger stood motionless, not seeming to know how to respond. He gave a small grunt in reply and holstered the revolver. As he began to walk away Cortana said, "Why were they only trying to kill me?" She already knew the answer, but had always had an inherent need for a soundboard ever since Dr. Halsey created her. Cortana had always had more of desire for human contact than any other AI.

Roland turned around, his piercing gaze looking straight into her eyes, and then down at her stomach, "They were trying to kill him."

75. Chapter 75 The Once and Future King

Chapter 75: The Once and Future King

1:34 P.M., January 10th, 2013 (Gregorian Calendar) Quantico, Virginia

It had started more as a mental exercise than anything else. The writer knew that if he was going to make the story work, although on an instinctual level he knew it would work no matter what, he was going to have to find examples of nineteen appearing throughout Halo canon. This was not an easy feat, or so he once thought, considering that the number most often referenced in Halo lore was seven. A number of power for certain, if you believe in such things, but a far cry from the number he was looking for. What had surprised him, at least at first, was just how many references to nineteen there was in Halo. The year that the Master Chief woke up from cryo; that Sierra, John, and 117 added up to nineteen, that Osman was once Spartan 019, and that S which stood for Spartan was the nineteenth letter of the alphabet. This was all just the tip of the iceberg of course, as nineteen is so much more than just a number. It is the truth after all, perhaps the only truth that actually matters. What surprised him even more once he began writing was just how many parallels there were between John and Cortana's world, and Roland's. It was as if the story he was writing was more than just a fanfiction crossover. As if

the two stories were always meant to go together.

Now for Joseph nineteen had become more like an unwanted obsession, a number which he saw wherever he went. Given that his job required him to be around numbers all the time, it was not like he could just ignore it.

Dark brown mud squished angrily between the soles of his boots as he shifted his weight, the winter wind blowing across his face and seeping into the leather of the gloves he wore. This was the first time he had ever worked on a pipe crew, and the learning curve was fairly steep. He was top man, which meant he spent most of his time out of the ditch, guiding long pieces of concrete and metal pipes suspended from chains and thick steel straps into the deep holes in the ground where they could be installed. They had just begun to lay storm pipe, the backhoe digging its long teeth into the ground and throwing up earth into large piles, when a snag had been hit. The water line they had found was in the place they had expected it to be, only it was at the wrong depth, which meant that the grading on the storm pipe had to be changed so that it could fit underneath. The writer stood in front of a set of plans, a calculator that was much less bulky but otherwise not too dissimilar in appearance to the one that John Cullum offered Catherine Halsey, and several pieces of yellow legal paper with numbers scrawled across haphazardly in dark black ink. He was trying his best to pay attention to what the foreman was doing, but like had happened so often since he began writing Joseph's eyes and thoughts wandered. As if they were drawn to it by an unseen magnetic force his eyes went to the bottom left hand corner of the plans where he read the words 'Sheet 1 of 19'. The writer immediately tore his eyes away, adjusted the hard hat on top of his head, and began to dig into his pocket for a cigarette he now desperately needed.

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Thunderclap, Mid-World

Her hands could not move anywhere near the speed that her mind did, a fact that frustrated Cortana to no end. She knew exactly where each piece to the revolver went, could put the weapon together in her mind a thousand times over in the span of a few seconds, but her hands refused to move at the same speed. There was a click as the cylinder snapped into place, and her right hand moved to the bullets that were arranged neatly on a red handkerchief by her crossed legs. Her fingers fumbled with the first bullet, causing her to bite down on her lip to contain her frustration. The next five went in smother, although her fingers still lacked the grace and precision she desired them to possess. With a final snap she flicked the cylinder back into place and set it down on the handkerchief. Her eyes moved upward to the gunslinger who was sitting across from her, his legs crossed in an identical fashion as her, his sharp eyes examining every move she made.

"Faster," he said, and Cortana once again bit her lip. She picked the gun up and began to disassemble it again, and he could tell by the slight jerk in her movements that she was angry. Cortana was faster now though, even if she did not perceive the change just yet, and from Roland's point of view her hands were moving in a blur of motion. Cortana was now in her normal state faster than any average human had the right to be, and Roland knew that her frustration

stemmed from her perceiving her hands to be moving slower than they actually were. It would take her a while to get use to this change, to know that time was something that could be manipulated. That could it could speed up or slow down depending on how a person's mind chose to view it.

She's ready, the gunslinger thought, and he could feel the relief wash over him. _Tomorrow I will teach her how to shoot_. In the span of less than ten seconds the long gun had been disassembled and reassembled, although to Cortana it felt as if almost a full minute had passed. She placed hard caliber back on the handkerchief, moving her head upwards to look at Roland again. He said nothing, and Cortana breathed in a sigh of relief. Silence, for Roland as well as John who had also trained her in the Calla, meant approval. She picked the gun up, not even realizing that the weight of the revolver had changed from feeling like a brick to being lighter than a small notepad, and placed it in her holster. She leaned forward slightly, placing her elbows on her knees, feeling a strain around her waist. There was no denying it now, her jeans fit tighter than they did before, and Cortana wondered just how far along in her pregnancy she was. It was no use counting the days, the lengths of which varied with each passing sunrise. Yet if her biological clock was anything to go on, she would start showing soon.

Dusk had settled on Thunderclap, covering the ka-tet in the land's brownish tint, the harshness of the cloud covered sky overhead no longer even offering the comfort of the passing Beam. The mountain range stretched over the horizon in either direction, blocked only by the backs of Jake and Eddie, and the memory of John, Callahan, and Susannah who would have sat in the empty spaces of the circle they now formed. There was no fire, devil grass even in this land growing sparse enough to not be counted on as a constant food source, and their MRE rations were now running dangerously low. If they did not find a way to cross or go under the mountains soon, Cortana calculated they would likely die of starvation or thirst before they reached the end of the mountain chain.

She sat there, her stomach rumbling even after the extra food she had been given and had eaten with a certain amount of guilt but with little reluctance. Her hand gravitated to the active camouflage module next to her, taken from the boy she had killed who knows how many days earlier. It was she who broke the silence, which had descended upon the ka-tet both without their knowledge and without their consent.

"There is something I don't understand about the Old People. On the Forerunner Technological Advancement Tier by all rights they were a Tier 4 or space age civilization, and even then they had only gone to the moon and back." She looked up and saw that Eddie and Jake were looking at her while Roland still maintained his usual outward appearance of mild disinterest. Now though, unlike before, she could tell by the way his eyes would flick subtly towards her every few seconds that he was paying attention to her. Cortana took a breath of stale air, running her fingers along the smooth surface of the active camouflage module, before continuing. "Yet much of their technology is on par with what the UNSC was able to develop during the Human Covenant War, and their knowledge of slipspace surpasses even what the Forerunners were capable of. Technically, if you consider their ability to create portals to other realities, they were a Tier 0 civilization"

"What does that mean?" Eddie asked, his one good shirt now covered in dust and grime.

"It means being able to travel to other galaxies, and the Old People were able to do much more than that. Traveling to other universes is a technological feat that no civilization I have ever heard of has been able to accomplish."

"Tet was able to do it," Jake said. "They built suits of MJOLNIR too, just like the Old People."

Cortana nodded, sending Jake a small smile. "You're right. I hate to make a comparison between them and the Covenant, but Tet is more adaptive than innovative. They were only able to build doorways because they studied the ones the Old People made, and they were only able to create suits of MJOLNIR because they had Dr. Halsey help them. The Old People are different though." She held up the active camouflage module in her hand for the others to see, "This design is completely different from what the Covenant used, which tells me that the Old People were able to invent it themselves." She set the module down and brought it up to her chin, "I think the reason why they were able to create doorways is because The Dark Tower and the physical manifestation of the Beams which hold it up only exist in this world, so they were able to study it directly. What bothers me the most though is their version of MJOLNIR and their ability to create AI's almost as advanced as what the UNSC could produce. Other than just chalking it up to karma again I can't think of any reasonable explanation as to why they were able to produce technology that was so similar." She took her hand off of her chin and looked at Roland. "What do you know about the Old People?"

"Little," the gunslinger said. "A few of the names of their kingdoms and empires remain, but nothing about their war except for the name of the disease which followed it is known."

Curious, Cortana asked, "What were the names of their empires?"

Roland shrugged his shoulders, "Merica, Britannia, Germania, Afrika, Rushka, and Oceania. That is all I remember." He sat up straighter, his aching joints infected by the dry twist creaking as he did. "What I do know is that they had very little faith in magic, and replaced the magical essence of the Beams with machines."

Cortana raised an eyebrow and looked at the other two. It was Eddie who answered her, "When we first found the Beam we could hear machinery in a facility underground right where it began. The machine that held the beam up must have been massive, but from what we could hear it was dying, and nobody in Roland's world knows how to fix it"

Cortana nodded and looked back at the gunslinger, "So that's why The Dark Tower is going to end up falling no matter what we do, because nobody knows how to fix the machines holding up the two remaining Beams."

"Aye," Roland said. "The Crimson King just wanted to speed up the process."

_But The Dark Tower is not going to fall, _Cortana thought. _At least not anytime soon, because the White keeps sending you back every time you reach the top of the Tower. _For knowing that existence was not going to come to an end anytime soon, Cortana felt an immeasurable amount of sadness at this idea. She was no longer sure how she felt about Roland, but she was sure that he did not deserve the fate that the White had given him. The familiar creeping feeling descended upon her chest as she thought about Roland's plight, but she quickly dismissed it. Shaking her head ever so slightly, Cortana looked the gunslinger directly in his brilliant light blue eyes, and for a moment her mind tricked her into thinking she was looking at John. "I know that The Crimson King is the son of Arthur Eld," she paused for a moment, just long enough to register the looks of confusion that passed across Eddie and Jake's faces. "But I'm not sure exactly how that happened."

"It is a long tale," Roland said.

Jake looked up at the fading light that was now coming from what had once been east, "It's not like we have anything else to do, and you have never told us about this before."

The gunslinger breathed in heavily through his nose, his fingers aching to reach for the tobacco in his satchel. Talking was a lot easier when he had a cigarette to roll between his fingers. One look at Cortana reminded him of the promise he made her, and he made a mental note to excuse himself once the story was over so that he could smoke. "Very well."

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Arthur Eld emerged in mid-world after the fall of the Old-People as a young warrior of unprecedented prowess. Little is known about what he looked like, other than he had dark black hair and piercing light blue eyes, a trait that was passed down to all of his descendants. No one knows for sure where he came from, although several legends exist. Some say he emerged from a great pyramid in which he had been entombed, others that he predated the Old People and ruled a kingdom long before their rise and fall, and others that he was spawned forth by The Dark Tower itself. Even more legends persist about his guns, the blue steeled revolvers which have thundered across the span of thousands of years and multiple worlds. There are those who claim that he brought Excalibur out of the tomb he was imprisoned in, while others insist that they were forged out of metal from another world. Yet, the most common of these legends say that they were a gift from the Can Calah, what some men call angels or messengers of the White.

Regardless of his origins, it is known that Arthur Eld quickly reunited humanity under one banner, establishing the inner and outer Baronies which collectively were known as the Affiliation. It was during his reign that the technology of the Old People began to see use again, and he ordered the building of the great armory of Hendrickson so that his knights could be supplied with guns, becoming mid-world's first gunslingers. At his coronation where he was declared the first king of the Affiliation, of mid-world, and of All-World, he declared that he and all of his descendants would uphold what some might call The Mantel. Guardianship of The Dark Tower, and by extension all of existence.

Yet, at the coronation another group arrived uninvited. Servants of the Prim led by the magician Maerlyn who presented Arthur Eld with the gift of Maerlyn's Rainbow, the thirteen magical orbs that allow those who wield them the ability to peer into the vastness of existence. It was here that Maerlyn's treachery was revealed, as he brought a daughter of none with him who quickly seduced Arthur and from their union a child was conceived. It was only after Arthur had been with she who is known in some worlds as The Crimson Queen an-tet that she attempted to kill the newly crowned king. Her assassination of Eld was thwarted, however, by the intervention of Sir Kay Deschain who laid down his life so that his king could live. Later, when it was found that Arthur's wife Rowena was barren, he took Sir Kay Deschain's daughter Emmanuelle as a gilly and with her produced his heirs, allowing her sons to keep the name Deschain and passing down that line both the sandalwood revolvers and the Horn of Gilead.

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Cortana had listened to the story without supplying any interruption, until the term jilly was used. In the High Speech jilly meant side wife, or mistress; a legal arrangement reserved only for the nobility so that a legitimate heir could be produced in the event that the wife was found to be infertile. It was this that caused her to interrupt Roland, "Do you agree with that, with gillies I mean." There was only the slightest hint of anger in her voice, mostly tempered with the understanding that Roland came from a society where such things, like conscripting children into military training, was perfectly acceptable. It was, however, present enough for both Eddie and Jake to pick it up and they switched their gazes from Cortana to Roland, waiting for the answer they already knew.

The gunslinger's face, which was now almost completely hidden by the dark shadows that had fallen on the ka-tet with the fading light, gave off a small frown. "Susan was a gilly." That was all he said. That was all he needed to say.

Cortana let off a slow sigh, suddenly feeling more tired now than she had felt since they left Fedic. Her eyes were heavy, but she clung on to consciousness if only to ask Roland one last question.

"The Crimson Queen was a daughter of none, like Mia was," she folder her arms across her middle. "Like I am."

If it were not for the shadows that cloaked his features, Cortana would have seen that he looked more tired now than she felt. "Aye. Your body was given to you by ka. In a way you are a product of the Prim." He paused, collecting his thoughts. The gunslinger would be the first to tell you that he knew little, and his understanding of the world around him was hindered by his lack of imagination. Most of his understanding came from simple speculation, and he accepted what he saw with the same amount of simplicity. This was both a great asset, one that protected his sanity when he confronted the man in black at the Golgotha, and a great hindrance. Now, Roland wished that he did not believe what he suspected to be true, but with Cortana's electric blue eyes cutting through the darkness towards him he could not withhold his gut instincts from her. "Every union between the Eld and a daughter of none has produced a child of exceptional power."

Cortana hung her head down, looking at her arms which were still wrapped around her middle, "You are saying that he will be like Mordred."

"No," Roland said, and the conviction in his voice caused her to look back up at him. "I am saying that once your son is born there is no telling how strong he will be."

Cortana closed her eyes and wrapped her arms tighter, "There is a phrase in the High Speech that refers to this." It was not a question, and Eddie and Jake looked at her expectantly.

When she did not continue Eddie asked, "What is it."

Still looking at the gunslinger Cortana said, "Roland?" She wanted to hear it from him, and in many ways needed to hear it from him.

Roland slowly nodded, "Commala dan-tete." When the words were out he tore his eyes away from Cortana's. "The coming of the little god."

76. Chapter 76 Love

Chapter 76: Love

10:17 A.M., January 17th, 2013 (Gregorian Calendar) Quantico, Virginia

He could stop, the writer knew that now. The voice that told him what to write, that moved his hand with a stern grip across the keyboard of his laptop was nearly driving him insane. Mid-world and the ka-tet was now nearly all he thought about. It kept him up at night, staring into the blackness of the ceiling above him, his mind aching for the story to finish, for it to be over so that the voice would leave him alone. Yet, he also knew that if he stopped writing, if he stayed away from the now massive document that contained his story long enough the voice would eventually go away. The only thing that kept him from quitting now were the reviewers, those that posted their thoughts on every chapter he put up, urging him to continue. He would often wonder if they knew how important they were to the story. The writer doubted that they did, or at least doubted that they fully comprehended how essential they were. Deep in the back of his mind next to the dormant memory of Roland and Cortana's visit nearly a month before was a thought almost to insane for him to even acknowledge. That the White had sent them to him, to give him the strength to keep going. He would have to come up with a way to thank them at some point, the writer decided. Some way to make sure they knew how important they were.

When he did sleep he dreamed, but not of mid-world. His dreams were filled with the singular and horrible vision of a great bleeding Red eye. Lidless, unblinking, unmoving, unsympathetic to all those beings that it felt were beneath it.

There was another voice now inside the caverns of his mind. It was soft and female, whispering words that seemed both familiar but somehow just beyond his ability to hear. She was trying to tell him something, and the writer knew that he desperately needed to know

what it was she was saying. Somehow the whole story depended on what she was telling him.

_John, _Joseph thought. _She is trying to tell me something about John. _His internal ear strained as he tried to make out the words, and for the first time in the days since he started hearing it he was just able to understand what she was saying.

(John is at The Dark Tower)

The loud beeping of a backup alarm dragged him from his thoughts and the writer looked up, suddenly aware once again of the biting cold digging at the folds of his work jacket. The temperature outside was in the teens, but with the wind chill it felt as if it was in the single digits, and the writer's breath came out in a thick mist as he shuddered against the wind.

"Heads up," his co-worker next to him said, wearing a thick brown jacket and an orange ski mask that hid most of his face. He was a few inches shorter than the writer, and only a few months older than him, and his humor reminded just a little of Eddie Dean. The writer looked up as the backhoe swung it's bucket around, two sets of thick metal chains swinging wildly as it did. Joseph reached out a hand, and caught one of the chains as it swung towards him, the cold that radiated from it biting into his gloved hand. He bent slightly, picking up the hook end of the chain and guided it over to the concrete manhole, the frozen earth beneath him crunching and crackling. It was cold enough that the dirt froze and became hard as stone, making shovels nearly useless. But still they worked, and not even the thin layer of snow on the ground could stop them from putting pipe into the ground. Quickly he attached the hook onto the manhole, pushing the tip of it through the metal loops that he had finished screwing into the concrete with a pipe wrench only moments before. Looking up the writer noticed that one of the hooks on the other side of the manhole had dropped out of the loop, and without thinking he reached over to try and fix it.

"Watch out!" The writer heard the voice of his co-worker shout at him and he ducked his head quickly, half a second later feeling a large thunk echo across the top of his hardhat as the teeth of the backhoe's bucket collided with his head. It was little more than a glancing blow, and the writer back peddled several steps out of the danger area, eyes fixed on the tooth that had nicked him. "Damn you nearly got your head taken off."

"Yeah," the writer said, taking off his hardhat and examining the small white scratch on top of it.

"You alright?"

The writer glanced over at the man next to him, putting on his hardhat back on as he did, "Yeah I'm fine. Just a little dazed." He kicked the frozen ground beneath him with his boot, "At least it's not muddy."

The man next to him gave him a look, and by the way his green eyes brightened the writer could tell he was smiling beneath the ski mask, "You know I just thought of a new nickname for you."

The writer gave a small smile. He already had several nicknames since

he began working construction; baby superman, high roller, the lieutenant, and junior being among them. "Alright let me hear it."

"PJ."

The writer raised an eyebrow, "What's that stand for?"

"Always positive Joe."

The writer laughed, more thick steam coming out of his mouth as he did. He had been more positive lately, a bit odd since he felt as if he was being driven to the brink of insanity by the number nineteen. This was something recent as well, as he had never been a positive person, not since that day so many years ago.

_Something happened, _Joseph thought. _Why can't I remember what that was?_

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Thunderclap, Mid-World

The rolling sound of canon fire echoed against the mountain chain on the horizon. Thunder clashing with the clouds over head that gave the land the ka-tet was traveling through its name as Cortana fired the revolver. The weight and recoil of the long gun had become almost nonexistent now but still she missed, the gold coin with the sigil of Gilead and the likeness of Arthur Eld sailing through the air untouched by the bullet that was slung at it. Cortana let the gun drop to her side as she fell back to the old habit of biting the inside of her cheek before she replaced the gun back in its holster. She did not bother looking at Roland, knowing full well what the gunslinger would say. He seemed to have an inexhaustible amount of coins in his satchel, and seemed fully content to waste them all and most of the morning until Cortana was able to hit one. So far lead and gold had failed to collide in midair.

"Again," Roland said, digging into his satchel for another coin.

Cortana shook her head, "It's not working." She closed her eyes and when they opened she looked at the aging warrior standing next to her. "I understand what you are trying to do but it's not going to work for me. I don't have a father."

Roland considered her for a moment, and then nodded towards her stomach, "Then remember the face of his father."

Cortana glanced down at where he had gestured at, and slowly nodded her head, breathing the words more than speaking them. "I can do that." She felt a small smile form across her mouth, "His face would be the last thing I would forget." She turned her back from Roland, letting her hands drop to her sides shoulder length apart, eyes closed. Her heart be slowed as her breathing relaxed, until it was almost as if it had stopped beating entirely. In her mind's eye she brought up John's picture, his rugged features that to Cortana made him handsome in a primitive sort of way; every line, crease, and scar that she knew more intimately than anyone etched into the roof of her head. He was there, entirely solid, and Cortana was almost convinced

that if she reached out with her hand she could touch him. She longed to touch him, perhaps even more now than when she had been incapable of the sensation. Knowing what it was like to feel him beneath her hand made not being able to do so all that much worse. Slowly she recited her lessons.

"I do not aim with my hand; she who aims with her hand has forgotten the face of her father. I aim with my eye."

"I do not shoot with my hand; she who shoots with her hand has forgotten the face of her father. I shoot with my mind."

"I do not kill with my gun; she who kills with her gun has forgotten the face of her father." She took one last shallow breath, the picture of John burning itself onto the surface of her brain, the last words he had whispered into her ear echoing across her soul. "I kill with my heart."

"Kill this," Roland said, and with no other warning he flung the gold coin across the arid plain in front of them, the air whistling around its curved edges. Cortana's eyes flew open, the gun in her hand and feeling the sandalwood grip before her mind even registered that she had reached for it. She felt the slightest of kicks in the palm of her right hand as the gun fired, and she could see both the coin and the bullet traveling across the gulf of space, moving towards each other as if guided by an invisible hand. There was a sharp clink as they collided with one another, and she saw with eagle like vision as the very edge of the gold coin was struck by the bullet, sending it end over end in the opposite direction. Cortana looked down at her own hands, her right one holding the smoking revolver, and the left one that hand fanned the hammer back still sitting there with its palm wide open. Slowly she placed the revolver back where it belonged on her hip, and when she looked at Roland she could not help the smile that formed.

"Better," the gunslinger said. "But you hit it off center."

Cortana gave a mostly amused huff, "You really do know how to be encouraging."

The corners of Roland's mouth twitched upwards, "You'll do better tomorrow."

"I should," Cortana said. "Or else I'm going have to blame the instructor for not doing his job." At this she could almost swear that Roland gave a genuine smile.

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The dream she had of Walter had been eating at her for the past month, or week, or day. Such measurements of time or meaningless in the long run anyway. Still she could not get what he said out of her mind, regardless of Roland's confidence that her son would not be like Mordred. She could hear him at night, the echoes of soft footfalls caused by bare feet, or even more disturbing the almost inaudible sound of eight long hairy legs walking across the floor of Thunderclap. Cortana was almost certain that he must be suffering as much as them, the animals that could be hunted mostly too small and sickly to be able to sustain a predator such as him for long. Still he pursued though, waiting for the time to strike, and Cortana found

herself wishing that he would attack so that she could sleep without the fear of waking up to a pair of poison laced fangs in her face.

It disturbed her to no end what the dark man had told her, and she needed somebody to talk to. She did not want to talk to Jake, the boy had enough to worry about and Cortana wanted him to hang on to what was left of his tattered childhood as long as he could. Nor could she talk to Roland, as his feelings for her would likely cloud his judgment. What she felt for the gunslinger had crept up on her slowly and methodically, and it was not until recently that she was able to come to terms with it. Eddie and Jake often went hungry to make sure that Cortana ate, their supplies of MRE's now exhausted, but it was Roland who went hungry most nights, and she rarely saw him eat or drink since they left Fedic. To her he looked sick, his once bold features now showing the signs of malnutrition and dehydration, his cheeks shallow and gaunt, his skin once a near permanent brown tan now unnaturally pale. Yet still he continued, never complaining, never seeming to run low of energy or will to push onwards.

There are many different types of love, and in a way Cortana had loved every member of the ka-tet. It was only with John that she had felt any romantic feelings, and Cortana knew that she would never feel that way towards Roland. But it was still love, and it was still there. She loved him in a way that is hard to define, and I am not skilled enough in the art of wordslinging to even hope to describe it. Perhaps I can satiate your appetite to say that she loved him in a way that offered no chance of physical intimacy, but perhaps an intimacy of a different kind. To go beyond the boundaries of friendship, but not to go so far as to court the romantic pitfalls of star crossed lovers. That right was reserved for John and John alone.

In the end she talked to Eddie, the pair walking a few dozen meters behind Roland and Jake as they crossed Thunderclap. She told him almost everything about her dream of Walter, leaving out only Roland's curse to arrive at The Dark Tower only to be sent back again. Roland, with his unnatural sense of hearing would be able to hear her conversation with Eddie. She did not mind, nor was it her intent to hide anything from the others except for that one crucial. A detail that could break the spirit of the ka-tet were she to reveal it. Cortana did not care and in fact wanted Roland to hear her story, but it was only Eddie's opinion that she wanted at the moment. Roland's opinion could come later.

When she had finished telling him about the prophecy Eddie reacted much in way that she expected, "You didn't actually believe him did you? I mean this is good old jeepers creepers we are talking about. Lying is part of his job description."

"I know," Cortana said. "But he mixes truth in with the lies. That is part of the reason why he is so dangerous."

Eddie shrugged his shoulders, "Alright, let's assume that everything he said was true. Does that change anything?"

Cortana looked at him questioningly, "What do you mean?"

"I mean does this change how you feel about John, or about the little guy you got cooking in there?" he pointed at Cortana's middle as he

said this.

"No," Cortana admitted.

Eddie gave her a smile, and although it was less sincere than the ones he had before Susannah's death, it was still contagious. "Okay. Now let's assume that your kid turns out to be exactly like Mordred, hairy legs and all. Would you love him any less?"

"No," Cortana said. "I pretty much told Walter that, as crazy as it sounds."

"Of course it's crazy. You're a woman, being partly insane is your job."

"Careful," Cortana said. She tried to sound stern but failed miserably.

Eddie waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, "If you wanted political correctness you should have gone to somebody else."

"And who else would I have gone to?"

"You're smart enough to figure it out," Eddie said, his smile now growing more sincere. "Let me guess, you are also worried because Walt made a comment about how John never said he loved you."

"I know he loves me," Cortana said, correcting Eddie much in the same way she had corrected Halsey without realizing it. "It just wasn't until he mentioned it that I realized how much I needed to hear it from him."

"He has said it," Eddie said. "In a way at least." He moved his gaze to the father and son duo walking in front of them, his eyes becoming partially unfocused as he dug into his memory. "You know the big guy told me after," he paused. "Well after what happened to Susannah. He told me about what the White said to him." He looked back at Cortana, "You know he was ready to kill anybody who got in his way in order to find you? And I mean everybody." He gave a short muffled laugh, "When the White first told him not to go after you and instead go back to see Cullum the Chief said no. It was only after the White promised him that he would see you again that he agreed to do it." His smile shrank, but was still present on his face, "I think when the creator of all existence has to directly intervene in order to keep him from trying to find you says 'I love you' more than anything else."

Cortana returned his smile, feeling the sudden urge to kiss him on the cheek. "Thank you. I meant what I said before, you really are a sweetheart."

Eddie shook his head, "And I already told you. I'm not a sweetheart. I'm fromâ€|"

"Brooklyn," Cortana finished for him. "Trust me I got that."

Eddie smile proudly, "Co-Op City born and raised."

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He stood there, his broad shoulders etched against the murky sky, a living frame. The last of his kind. The last of the Line of Eld except for his son and one other who had yet to be born. Older than any other being that came before him, his true age dwarfing the Didact to the point where the great Forerunner warrior looked like a child next to him. And he did not remember. He remembered none of the countless times he had reached The Dark Tower.

Cortana once commented to Eddie that he spoke of Roland as if he was not entirely human.

"I'm not sure that he is," Eddie had said. "Roland is different. I'm not sure exactly what he is, but he's something alright."

The gunslinger sensed Cortana's approach, but did little to acknowledge her presence, his gaze fixed on a point in the far off distance. When she spoke her words tugged at him, but still he did not turn around. "I know how you feel about me." She waited for him to respond, but after several seconds he still had said nothing. Cortana closed her eyes, looking for the right words to say, "It's taken me a long time to admit it, but I guess in a way I do love you." Roland glanced over his shoulder, but only for a moment before looking again at the horizon before him. Cortana continued, "But I can't feel for you the same way you feel about me."

"I know," Roland said, at last speaking.

Cortana nodded at his words, but it did little to mend the unwanted and uninvited guilt that she felt, "I assume you heard what I told Eddie." The gunslinger's silence was the only answer he was willing to give, and Cortana took it for a yes. "Have you heard of the prophecy Walter told me before?"

"Aye," Roland said. "The words were slightly different, but I have heard of it." His light blue eyes looked at the ground, an expression that Cortana could not see but still felt. "There is another one. A prophecy I have only heard rarely."

Cortana's head perked up, fully attentive, "What is it?"

"That when the last of the Line of Eld leaves mid-world, and when he is most needed, Arthur Eld will return." Again he glanced over his shoulder, although the person he was now looking at was not Cortana.

Cortana's eyes grew heavy, and she could feel the beginnings of moisture creep into them. "You'll die," she said. "If you choose me over The Dark Tower."

"I've lived too long," Roland said. His shoulder's dropped almost unnoticeably as he said it.

"I need to know," Cortana said. "I need to know what your choice would be."

"It won't come to that," Roland said, the tone of his voice hinting at defiance. "I won't let it come to that."

"And if it does?" Cortana asked. Again she waited in vain for the answer, and once again the gunslinger did not give it. Just as she

was about to walk away Roland spoke.

"Come here and tell me what you see." Cortana went to stand next to him, and her eyes avoided looking at him. Every time she looked at him now she saw a sick man on the verge of death, and it hurt her to much to look at him now. Instead her eyes scanned the land in front of her, at first seeing nothing. Then she saw it.

"That'sâ€|" Cortana said, blinking her eyes repeatedly. "I don't believe it."

Roland nodded, "Can you read the words on the side of it?"

"No," Cortana said. "Write them down in the dirt for me. I'll check the archives once you do."

Roland knelt down, no longer able to hide the wince of pain from her as he did. The agony in his joints had simply become too great. He withdrew a knife from his belt and began to etch three words in the low speech on the ground, Cortana reading them several times before she dared believe what they said.

SPIRIT OF FIRE

77. Chapter 77 Water

Chapter 77: Water

**A/N Originally this was supposed to be one long chapter, but I decided to break it up into two parts. I know this is pretty short, but I'm exchanging a super long chapter now for one later on down the road. **

(Space/Time Anomaly) The Golgotha, Twenty Miles from the Western Sea, Mid-World

It had been an untold number of years since the Fall of Gilead and the death of all his gunslingers at Jericho Hill, and at last he had caught the man he was chasing. The man that could tell him how to get to The Dark Tower, and his first thought was that he lied in every word.

The man in black leered at Roland who was staring with silent contemplation at the burning green embers of the card of Life that the dark man had tossed into the fire, turning his gaze slowly at the other five cards arranged in a rigid pattern on the ground. The gunslinger's eyes flicked upwards as the dark man drew the seventh, and supposedly final card, his heart beating faster as he waited, knowing with almost absolute certainty what it would be. Yet when Walter drew it, his heart nearly stopped, and he felt the unexplainable sensation of confusion creep over him, as if this was not what was supposed to happen. Looking at the man in black his once arrogant smile was gone, and he quickly flipped the card over so that he too could look at it, a similar look of confusion appearing upon his face.

"The Empress," he said, almost quietly. He turned the card over again so that it faced Roland, and he leaned over to study the other cards intently. "Yes now I see. I'm not drawing these cards just for you,

but for another as well."

"Who?" Roland asked.

The dark man did not answer him, instead bringing a hand up to his chin, "Eight cards drawn and seven in the formation." He rubbed his chin, the dark pupil's of his eyes darting back and forth across the cards rapidly. "Seven," he muttered. "One, one, and seven."

"What does that mean?" Roland asked, not bothering to hide the impatience in his voice.

The dark man looked at him almost as if he had forgotten the gunslinger was sitting there, and as he did his smile returned. He pointed at the card, the woman clad in a soft blue and wielding a shield and sword radiating with an unnatural beauty, "The blue woman. Alain once spoke of her did he not?" Roland, who just barely remembered Alain's vague vision, simply nodded. "Pity," Walter said, letting his smile fade into a light frown. "If he had been stronger in the touch perhaps he would have known that you would be the one to shoot him."

Both Roland's jaw and his fists clenched, "Damn you."

The man in black tittered, "If I am damned, then what does that make you gunslinger?"

Roland tore his eyes away from Walter in disgust, most of it directed at himself. He looked at the woman on the card again, his gaze stopping at the symbol of Venus on her shield. "That sigul, what does it mean?"

"Fertility," the dark man said. "Can-ah can-tah annah Oriza."

"All breath comes from the woman," Roland repeated back in the low speech.

The man in black had many faces, most of them false, but Roland was sure that the look of hurt he wore now was genuine. "Would you not use the High Speech with me? We are among the few left who can speak it."

"Because of you," Roland said coldly.

Walter shook his head, "Because of both of us."

The stare that the gunslinger leveled at the dark man now was one that would make most men wilt under it, but Walter instead matched it with a cold stare at of his own. Roland again felt his eyes being drawn to the card, "Is she a goddess?"

Walter flipped the card over in his hand so that he could look at it again, "Perhaps, although for your sake as well as mine pray that you never meet her. In all likelihood you won't. They drift, gunslinger, and even if their ship comes in there is still yet one more enemy that my master can throw along their path." He reached over and neatly placed the card overtop of the Hanged Man, which unknown to Roland now represented both him and John.

"What does that mean?"

"That she will be the end of you," the dark man said.

Roland felt his jaw set, the familiar feeling of ice washing over him as he discarded his emotions, "How do I prevent this?"

The man in black's grin grew until nearly all of his teeth were showing, and reached to draw the eighth and final card from the deck, "The same thing you have always done."

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Thunderclap, Mid-World

For days they traveled towards the Spirit of Fire, and with each passing sunrise the crashed UNSC ship and the massive military compound that surrounded it grew no closer, and Cortana was beginning to wonder if the whole thing was not just some shared delusion. Her mouth ached with thirst, and the only thing that kept her from taking a drink was the knowledge that the half full water skin was the only water that the entire ka-tet had left. Besides, she was more worried about the gunslinger's condition than her own.

She had finally discarded her blue jeans and was now wearing the sweats that Tet had provided, and although now they were warm and uncomfortable when the colder weather at last set in she would be immensely grateful to have them. Roland walked ahead of the group, and the first warning signs came when she noticed that he had stopped sweating, and the second when he swayed slightly on his feet as they climbed a small rise with a rocky outcrop on top. Cortana quickened her pace and placed a hand on his arm, causing him to look around at her. What she saw frightened her, as the only thing that still looked bright and vibrant were his eyes, his skin now a ghostly pale and his lips dry and cracked. It was then that Cortana realized that Roland was not just sick or thirsty, he was dying.

"You need to rest," She said, putting downward pressure on his arm. He did not resist, allowing her to guide him into a sitting position with his back up against one of the large boulders, although the look he gave was more of annoyance than gratitude. Eddie and Jake followed up behind her, both looking just as worried and just as thirsty as Cortana felt.

"He's hardly had anything since we left Fedic," Jake said, the boy seeming to almost be ready to sway unsteadily on his feet himself. Cortana grabbed his arm and moved him with the same gentle firmness into a sitting position beside Roland. Letting his head thud against the rock, Jake closed his eyes and his breathing became shallow and hoarse. She went to Roland first, bringing the water skin up to his lips, but the gunslinger mustered enough energy to push it away.

"I'm fine," he said, the heavy way in which his hand fell back to the ground betraying his lie.

"Don't give me that," Cortana said. "I know you well enough now to know you are different than John in a lot of ways, but please don't be as stubborn as him when it comes to something like this." She placed the water skin back up to his lips, but again he pushed it away, this time much more forcefully.

Roland turned his head towards Jake, whose breaths were still short and ragged. "The boy," he said.

Cortana hung her head, biting back her anger. She brought the water up to Jake, and when he pushed it away in the same fashion as Roland, her anger boiled out of her. Grabbing the back of Jake's head she began to whisper forcefully in his ear. "You are just as much my son as he is," Cortana said, feeling Jake's half closed eyes go to her stomach. "And when I tell you to drink some water you drink it. Understand?" She waited for him to protest, but instead he just nodded, the words either having an effect on him or he was just too tired to argue. Cortana did not care at that moment what it was, bringing the water again to Jake's mouth who took a long reluctant gulp. She took her own sip of water after him, frowning as the last of the liquid drained out of the container. _Out of food, out of water, _she thought, looking at the mocking mirage of the Spirit of Fire in the distance. "We're not going to make it." The words had slipped out of her mouth before she even realized that she had spoken them, and Cortana immediately cursed herself.

"We'll make it," Roland said. He stuck out his hand to Eddie who pulled him up, both men swaying on their feet and looking ready to fall back over before they regained their footing.

Cortana shook her head, reaching a hand out to brush the few strands of greasy blonde hair out of Jake's face, revealing a small crop of acne caused by Thunderclap's radiation. "What are we going to do?"

Roland attempted to swallow, his throat burning as he did, and he turned to face the downed spaceship in the far off distance. "There will be water if God wills it."

78. Chapter 78

Chapter 78: Project Freelancer

They did make it, just as Roland said they would, both the ship and the military compound suddenly appearing to have moved towards them as the dawn approached, or perhaps they were the ones that had moved closer to it during the blackness of the night. The final leg of their journey towards the crashed ship took less than half the morning, as if a silent force was bending the rules of time in space in order to hurry them along towards what Cortana hoped was their deliverance from a less than noble death in the wilderness.

There will be water if God wills it, that is what Roland had said, and Cortana found it odd for the gunslinger who had grown up believing in the pantheon of Gilead's gods to say such a thing. Still it seemed as if the gunslinger was right about this as well, and Cortana wondered when she too had started believing in such things. Maybe the lack of food and water was finally getting to her.

A large faded sign, the bold letters that issued the iron clad edict for all the worlds to see having faded to the point where they were almost unreadable, stood on the ten foot high wall next to the main entrance of the compound which consisted of two steel doors several feet thick and rusted out machine gun turrets on either side. The

message on the sign was simple, and direct.

****NORTH CENTRAL POSITRONICS****

*****PROJECT FREELANCER'' FORWARD RESEARCH FACILITY****

****NO TRESPASSING****

****PROPERTY UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT****

****ALL VIOLATORS WILL BE SHOT ON SITE****

This was not the first sign they had come across, but it was the first to threaten lethal action, Cortana supposing that whoever decided to put it up must have thought that if the other warnings were not enough to deter any unwanted eyes then there was no use in keeping them alive. What got Cortana and the rest of the ka-tet's attention more than the sign, and even more than the massive hole in the concrete wall that would allow them access to the facility, was the smell of water. It was only the weakness of their own legs that kept them running towards it, the smell of it enough to release what little moisture was left in their own mouths, and when Cortana saw the source of the water she may very well have started to cry if her body was still capable of producing the tears. It was a small metal spout out of a building that looked as if it had once been a mess hall, the roof having long caved in but the exterior walls and apparently the underground plumbing having remained intact. Her eyes only barely registered the sign above the pump.

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The machine itself appeared to be brand new, as if someone had been inside the compound only a few days before and set it up, the thumping of well oiled machinery behind it giving credence to this hypothesis. There was only a small part of her mind that registered these details, and over the next several days she would go over again and again attempting to analyze who might have been here before them. The closest answer she ever came to again was Roland's maxim.

There will be water if God wills it.

For now though she cared little for those small, and admittedly insignificant details, and her hand shook as she went to press the red button with the word ON stamped on top of it. When a steady stream of water began to pour out when her finger compressed it she nearly gave a shout of joy. With the same shaking hands she cupped them underneath the streaming water, and splashed the cool clear liquid on her face. At this moment nothing had ever felt better.

â€|

Even the plastic taste that the camelbak gave to the water could not take away from how good it felt to have the divine liquid rush down

her throat. She took small sips, knowing full well that to take larger gulps in her state of dehydration would only make her sick, the cool feelings of the now full water skins against her legs making her eyes grow heavy. Her hair was wet, as was the front of her sweatshirt, the splashing of water against her face the closest thing Cortana had to a bath or shower in months. Eddie and Jake sat beside her, their shirts wet in a similar fashion with them also taking small deliberate sips, the gunslinger several dozen meters away from them quietly smoking and Cortana was glad to see that at least some of his color had returned. He still looked sick though, still just on the brink of death, the great equalizer engulfing him in such a way that she could almost see a black aura surrounding him. Perhaps it had always been there, and Cortana was just now noticing it. They sat in comfortable silence with their backs against the wall of the mess hall and had Cortana's mind been capable of such a feat it would have been completely blank at this point. She was always thinking though, always analyzing, and now her mind was going through any archival data on the Spirit of Fire, the great technological monolith standing with resolute firmness in the center of the facility, all of its entrances welded shut, and large bunker complexes standing guard around the ship long after its custodians had gone to the clearing at the end of the path.

The ship had been built in the year 2473 as a colony ship, but was later requisitioned by the UNSC in the year 2520 and later refitted for military use. With Captain James Gregory Cutter as its commanding officer and SNA 1292-4 "Serina" as its onboard smart AI the ship participated in the Harvest Campaign and later the First Battle of Arcadia during the Human Covenant War. After the Battle of Arcadia the Sprit of Fire pursued a Covenant force into uncharted space and was never heard from again. Later in 2534 the ship was reclassified from "missing" to "lost with all hands" although no official explanation was ever given by the UNSC as to why the change was made. With Cortana's admittedly limited knowledge of ONI Section Zero which apparently had at least some knowledge about the existence of the multiverse, she could take at least a shaky guess as to why. Looking around at the large military buildup surrounding the downed battleship, Cortana also came up with two other theories. Either the Old People had known exactly when and where the Spirit of Fire would land in mid-world, undoubtedly through a thinny, or they were able to draw the ship into their reality. Both prospects were unsettling. She relayed this information to the rest of the ka-tet, more as a way to keep herself awake than anything else, but if they found both the data and her theories interesting they did not show it, their faces displaying the same tired expression that Cortana felt on her own.

After she was finished talking, her mind now going over the relevant schematics on the Spirit of Fire's military refit, data she was not cruel enough to bore her companions to death with, Jake's head suddenly perked up, his eyes darting around.

"See something you like?" Eddie asked, motioning his hand towards several rusted out M1 Abrams tanks parked roughly one-hundred meters away from them. "Nobody is going to stop you from driving one, although good luck trying to get it to start."

Jake shook his head, "It's not that." He stood up and began to stretch out the soreness in his legs and arms, pulling the UNSC pistol out of the band of his jeans. "Food." He took off running,

disappearing behind the mess hall, and Cortana listened to the fading sound of his footfalls. Several minutes later, just as she was about to ask Roland to go and see if he was alright, the loud report of the pistol rolled over the wall of silence that had fallen over the base.

Eddie slowly stood up and peered past the corner of the mess hall. "Aw hell." He let out a slow sigh before cracking his knuckles, "I'll go help him drag it over here." Cortana watched as he too disappeared behind the building and she felt the mixed feelings of both worry and hunger. The gunslinger came and sat beside her as they both waited, the smell of smoke still on his breath. Cortana's eyes widened as both Eddie and Jake reappeared from behind the building, dragging with both hands the bleeding corpse of a large grey wolf, its head having mostly disintegrated from the impact of the bullet. When they finished dragging the beast Jake stuck out one hand towards Cortana, silently asking for John's combat knife. Wordlessly she handed it to him, unable to get over how they could be surrounded by such an impressive display of technology, how she herself had been among the most advance computer systems ever created by man, and yet still be reduced to behaving like a group of wandering nomads.

_Because that's what we are when you get right down to it, _Cortana thought as she watched Jake slice the wolf's stomach open and begin to drag out its intestines. _Nomads, wanderers, homeless. Whatever name you want to give us it fits. _The all too familiar feeling of worry crept across her as she thought about the decisions she made, and how she was ever going to safely give birth in a place like this.

"Roland," she asked the gunslinger who turned his head only enough to indicate that he was listening. "You haven't everâ€|delivered a child before have you?"

"No," Roland said. He seemed to think for a few moments before adding, "A few horses."

Cortana gave a short laugh in spite of herself, "Well that makes me feel a whole lot better." Her eyes grew heavy again as she watched Jake and Eddie begin to skin the whole, its blood seeping into the brown and lifeless earth underneath it. She leaned her head up against the wall and closed her eyes.

â€|

_It was part dream, part memory, and Cortana knew in an instant it was not real. Still she vowed that she would let this illusion last as long as it could. Would make it last forever if she knew how. _

_ They were back in the bunker hidden in the plateau above Algul Siento in the last bed she would ever share with John, and the feel of his warm skin against hers was almost enough to convince her that it was real. If she had not known what it was actually like to feel him, what it was like to have his scent surround her and dull her mind with simple happiness, Cortana would have almost surely thought that this dream was real. _

_ With her eyes still closed she felt John move underneath her, and she responded by wrapping her arm tighter around him. "Don't leave," her voice came out in a tired mumble. "You're too warm."_

_ "I have to get up," John said, his voice exactly as she remembered it._

_ Cortana opened her eyes and repositioned her body so that it was completely over top of him. She looked up into his blue eyes which shined even in the dim light, "Now you can't leave."_

_ John's mouth ticked upwards, the closest he had ever come to giving her a smile until the moments just before his death, "I could just push you off."_

_ Cortana smiled back at him, "You won't though." Knowing she had won Cortana laid her head down on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. It thudded gently into her ear, and only the muffled sound that it made told her that she was not really hearing it. She pushed that thought away, happy at least for the moment to pretend that this was real. "You ruined me you know that?" She raised her head back up to look at him and smirked at the expression he gave her. "Before you came along I was a responsible well behaved AI."_

_ "I have a hard time believing that," John said._

_ She smacked him lightly on the shoulder but could not help the smile that formed, "Okay so maybe I was not that well behaved, but still." She ran a hand through his grey hair, feeling the stiff bristles rub up against her skin, "Me being obsessed with knowing what it was like to touch," she leaned in and briefly pressed her lips up against his, "to kiss. That was all because of you."_

_ "I wasn't trying," John said, reaching his own hand out and placing it against her cheek. _

_ Cortana leaned into it and closed her eyes, the sensation of his hand against her face more a product of memory than anything else. "Still your fault. Believe it or not most Smart AIs don't care about not being human. That was pretty much only unique to me." _

_ "I always thought you were odd," John said, the barest hint of humor in his voice._

_ "Again, because of you." Cortana breathed in deeply, her electric blue eyes meeting John's again. "Are you really still out there?" She knew full well that John's answer would be the product of her own desires, but his answer still filled her with hope._

_ "Yes."_

_ Cortana took his hand in hers and gently kissed the callused palm, the scars from his augmentations still clearly visible on his wrists, "When will I see you?"_

_ "Soon," John said. "I promise."_

_ "You better keep it," Cortana said. "Or else you're going to be in trouble."_

_ John's mouth twitched upward again, "You know this is a dream right?"_

_ Cortana sighed, her mouth turning from a smile into a small frown, "I know, and I know whatever you say is only because I want you to say it." She dug her head back into John's chest and closed her eyes again, "Still even if this is a dream, I don't want to wake up from it."_

â€|

It was the smell of searing meat over a hot fire that woke her, and Cortana let out a soft moan of disappointment as her eyes opened. Disappointment turned into disgust as she saw with her blurred vision what Roland was offering her, an uncooked serving of the wolf's liver. She looked at it, then back at the cooking meat hanging over the fire by two sickly looking branches. "Can't I cook it first?"

"No," Roland said firmly, again offering the raw liver to her. Cortana knew that there was a method to the gunslinger's madness, that cooking the liver would cause it to lose some of it's vital nutrients, nutrients that Cortana desperately needed in her condition. Still, it did not take away from the disgust she felt. She took it from Roland, the squishy sliminess of the liver doing little to increase her appetite for it, and tentatively took a bite. The taste was revolting in her mouth and she quickly swallowed before taking another larger bite, desperately wanting it to be over. It seemed like an eternity before she was finished and Cortana took a large sip of water in a vain attempt to wash the taste from her mouth. It was still there even with the water, and she grabbed a hunk of meat offered by Jake and took a large chunk out of it, with both its heat and its gamey taste finally destroying the flavor of the liver.

"So any idea where we go from here?" Eddie asked, working on his own hunk of meat.

Cortana motioned with her head at a building half buried in the earth a couple hundred meters away from them, "If I had to guess I would say that was this facility's main research center. If we can find a computer that is working I can access it and figure out what went on here."

"Sounds good," Eddie said. He looked over his shoulder at the looming figure of the UNSC ship. "They made them pretty big didn't they?"

"Infinity was bigger," Cortana said. "Much bigger, about the size of a small city."

Eddie turned back around and raised an eyebrow, "And the UNSC had money to do this after the war you guys fought?"

Cortana shrugged, "Not sure how they funded it, but societies always find a means to expand their military."

Eddie looked around at the hulking ruins of the Old People's war machines, "I can see your point."

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There was only the slight scent of death inside the underground

research center, skeletons strewn about with tattered lab coats that had once been white, bullet holes in the walls indicating their ultimate fate. Most of the consoles they came across were shattered, bullets having long ago ripped through them with the same level brutality that had killed all the scientists stationed at the compound. To Cortana, all this evidence pointed to one thing and one thing only.

Chaos. Pure and utter chaos, that which precipitates the fall of any great civilization.

It was deep within the inner most depths of the building that Cortana finally found a computer terminal that seemed to be even in the barest of working orders, and she stretched her hand out towards it, feeling a slight cramp in her stomach as she sifted through the files. There was a frown etched across her face at what she found, or rather what she had not found. There were no records about the Spirit of Fire's crash, no indication about what happened to the crew or even if they had still been alive when Project Freelancer did their search of the ship. If Cortana had to guess she would say that they had not been, but it was still only a guess. What she did find were scraps of data that she scabbled together to make at least a somewhat coherent picture.

"Some of it makes sense now," she muttered, withdrawing her hand. "How the Old People were able to create power armor and AIs at least as advance as what the UNSC was able to produce. All of it came from this crash." She stood up, thankful that the abdominal cramp was now gone, its pain just beginning to reach the point of being unbearable. "They found something else on the ship as well. Life Form 8722 which I also found referenced in the bunker at Algul Siento."

"Any idea what it is?" Jake asked.

Cortana shook her head, "Still no specifics as to what it is, but there is some good news. They managed to capture a specimen and took it to a lab that's buried deep in the mountain range. From the schematics I was able to pull up it should run completely to the other side of the mountain which is our ticket out of here."

"Can't be Covenant can it?" Eddie asked. "I mean those guys were pretty fanatical judging by what you've told us and what we saw at Algul Siento."

"Covenant prisoners of war were exceedingly rare, but not completely unheard of," Cortana said. "I suppose it's possible that the Spirit of Fire's crew was able to capture a prisoner. I can tell you for certain what it's not though."

"What?" Roland asked. He seemed to be fidgeting slightly, as if he was receiving a premonition that only he was privy to. It was the same feeling that he and John had felt prior to the ka-tets assault on Algul Siento.

"The Flood," Cortana said. "The UNSC did not encounter them until 2552."

Chapter 79: Redemption

Nine Years After the Fall of Gilead (Space/Time Anomaly) Twenty-Five Miles East of Jericho Hill, Outer Baronies, Mid-World

Roland Deschain and Aileen Ritter were the only ones to have survived the apocalyptic Battle of Jericho Hill, the first female gunslinger clawing her way out of the same mountain of bodies as Roland himself had been imprisoned in, a spear driven deep into her chest. It had only taken one glance for Roland to know that the wound was mortal, and in between the coughing which shook her body and spewed up blood Aileen had asked him to take her to Gilead so that she could rest. The gunslinger was sure that the request was a product of her weakened and delusional state, both of them having witness The Covenant Man's armies burn the city to the ground with their own eyes leaving the once proud capitol as little more than blackened out ruins. Still he was dinh, bound to serve his people just as much as they were bound to serve him, and she was the very last of his people. So he carried her towards Gilead, hoping only that she could live long enough to see it one last time with him.

"Roland," Aileen said, her once snarky and sarcastically humorous voice now reduced to little more than a whisper. "I'm thirsty." The gunslinger nodded, setting her down as gently as he could in the dark green patch of grass, feeling a twinge of pain in his chest that was surpassed only by the look of pain on her face. He had never loved her the same way he knew she loved him, but now that Aileen was dying Roland wished he could. Slowly he poured the water into her mouth, watching as most of it ran down her chin as Aileen struggled to drink. She began coughing again and Roland immediately withdrew the water skin, feeling a sensation of helplessness that he had only felt once before in his life, and would only feel once more again. When the coughing subsided she asked, "Is he still following us?"

Roland looked over at the horizon, seeing in an instant the outline of a billybumbler stretched across it. They had encountered the animal several miles back mourning over the body of a dead child who looked to be no more than six. He had dark brown hair, freckles on his face, and his partially opened mouth revealed a gap between his two front teeth. The bumbler had said a single word as they approached it. "Ohn." At first the gunslinger thought that the animal had said 'gone', but after thinking on it further he realized that the bumbler had said the boy's name.

John.

"Aye," Roland said, his eyebrows furrowed as he watched the animal. _Why is he following us?_ More coughing of Aileen drew his attention away from the billybumbler and his mind desperately raced to think of something that could alleviate her pain. He found nothing and was forced to wait again for the fit to subside.

Aileen took in a deep labored breath when this latest fit ended, her eyes suddenly becoming clearer. "I would have followed you Roland." Another fit threatened to overtake her but she somehow found the strength to subdue it. "I would have followed you all the way to the Tower."

Roland slowly shook his head, his sweaty brown hair swaying as he did, "You told me that you thought The Dark Tower was a

myth."

Aileen actually managed to smile at his words, "I still do." Her hand reached out to his and Roland allowed her to take it. "I still would have followed you though, we all would have. There was always something about you." The strength of her grip surprised him, her voice becoming louder as she spoke. "If it does exist you need to find it. You need to find it for all of us."

"I willâ€¦" Roland began but Aileen cut him off.

"Let me finish," She said, the hold on his hand having now turned to a vice grip. "You need to promise me that you will find it and kill whoever gets in your way." Her voice broke on the last word and she fought to regain her new found strength. It escaped her grasp and the last words she spoke came out in a quiet hiss. "Even if Susan got in your way." Roland did not answer. His head was hanging low and his eyes refused to meet hers. "Promise me Roland."

â€¦

(Space/Time Anomaly) Project Freelancer Biological Research Center, Thunderclap, Mid-World

"Strange," Cortana muttered, withdrawing her hand from the broken door controls which had sealed the facility carved deep into the mountains like a hushed casket. Unlike all the other ruins of the Old People's military they had found, this facility had no signs, nothing to indicate to the ka-tet of what its true purpose was or the death that awaited them inside.

"What's strange," Eddie asked. "Cuz I can think of a few thousand strange things I've seen since Roland dragged me into mid-world."

Cortana shook her head, "Nothing. It's just that the Old People really put in a lot of effort to make sure this door stayed shut." She took another look at her surroundings, taking note of every anomaly she found. In addition to the missing signs and the unusually tough security on the facility's entrance she noticed that the twin concrete bunkers which flanked the entrance were facing towards the facility rather than away from it. A thought bubbled into the forefront of her mind, and she took half a second to consider it fully. _No, _Cortana thought. _How could they have ever contained something like that, and even if they did any potential outbreaks would have starved to death by now if they were trapped inside._

"Is it going to be a problem?" Roland asked. He was answered by the creaking of steel doors swinging open on hinges that had not been used in millennia. A vile stench issued forth from the sealed tomb, a scent that Cortana would have instantly recognized had she been human at the time she and John had encountered it. The Spartan would surely have known what it meant had he still been alive, but he was not, and the ka-tet was weaker because of it.

"Does that answer your question?" Cortana asked, her voice squeaking as she attempted to cover up her nose. "It should take us a few hours to reach the other side."

Jake who was covering his nose in a similar fashion asked, "Can't we

take a shortcut?"

"I am taking a shortcut," Cortana replied irritably. She took in one last breath of fresh air before stepping inside. "Right through the labs." The four remaining members of the ka-tet followed her inside, the doors shutting tightly behind them and sealing their fate. By the time they reached the other side of the mountains only three would be left alive.

â€|

Cortana had only been able to partially restore power to the facility, the few remaining florescent lights illuminating the path in front of them, while leaving the rest of the narrow passageways shrouded in darkness. After thirty minutes Cortana had the feeling that they were being watched, and after forty minutes she was sure of it. Time seemed to have regained its footing in mid-world at least for the moment, and she felt each second pass by with excruciating agony as she led them deeper under the mountains, darting in and out of the passageways that together created an expansive labyrinth. She did not bother to tell the others of her fears, seeing in their faces that they felt the same eyes on them as she did. _How? _She thought as the stench continued to violate her senses. _How could it have survived this long? _They turned another corner, all their hands now steadily drifting to the weapons at their sides. _Unless_, she continued to think. _Unless someone was feeding it._ The cloud of thick brown murky air that had begun to develop as they marched deeper into the facility only served to facilitate her fears, with only Roland failing to cough on the noxious fumes. These fears, which had haunted her in her darkness of nightmares, the feeling of being violated, of her code being ripped apart and ravaged, the feeling of being raped by a being that was far more powerful then she could ever hope to be. All these fears were confirmed when they at last reached the lab, a single sign, the only sign they had ever encountered throughout their entire journey into the abyss, silently announcing their doom. Placed on the cold grey walls devoid of life which surrounded them, trapped them in another person's grave, it simply readâ€|

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The door it was placed above was sealed shut, and Cortana had begun to step backwards from it when the door silently slid open, a rush of air hitting her in the face.

"It can't be," Eddie muttered as he surveyed the contents of the lab. "You said the UNSC didn't run into theâ€|"

"I know," Cortana said. She felt as if she was on the brink of hysterics, the memory of what had been done to her now having a physical body to remember it with, and she could almost feel an unwanted intrusion between her legs. Her breaths became heavy and it was only the gunslinger's hand on her shoulder that kept her sanity intact, gave her something solid to hang onto and stay within the material world. Slowly she stepped into the lab, her face cringing as her boots stepped on broken glass. There were a dozen containment tanks similar in appearance, although not as nearly robust, as what the Forerunner's had used. It was not that they were all broken that chilled Cortana deep into the most inner part of her being, it was that they were freshly broken, the floors still shimmering with

puddles of preservative liquid. "The Flood." She said shakily, her eyes moving to the corners of the lab, underneath the desks and computer terminals, her vision hampered by the flickering of the florescent lights. "It's here."

Pain suddenly shot across her mind and Cortana's knees buckled underneath her, Roland's firm grip underneath her shoulders the only thing that kept her standing. Cortana's eyes rolled into the back of her head as liquid iron filled her brain.

(Again you have come to me to share my grave)

_No, _Cortana desperately thought back. _You can't be the same one. You can't be. _

Ageless tentacles wrapped around her brain, suffocating her consciousness and moving to exterminate her free will. It was then that she saw it, the entity turning on a memory as one would flip a switch. The memory of those same tentacles dragging both her and John underneath the lake on Installation 05.

Leviathan, a sea monster described in the Bible, the ferocity of which is unmatched, and what is space by the greatest body of all celestial waters?

Leviathan, a book by Thomas Hobbes who advocated that the most prudent of societies should allow themselves to be ruled by an absolute sovereign, and what is a hive mind but the most absolute of all sovereigns?

The demon Leviathan, he who in some worlds is known as the Gravemind.

(I am that I am) the Gravemind replied, its long tendrils tightening their hold on her psyche. (As timeless and as formless as the void that birthed me, I ebb and flow across the tides of eternity) He loosened his hold on her mind, only to slide downwards and wrap his tentacles around her womb. (You once hid a secret from me, and now I see that you hide another) Just as he was about to squeeze and extinguish the life that grew inside her, Cortana's emotions turned from panic, into fury.

"NO!" She did not know that she had shouted the words, but heard the Gravemind roar in pain as an electric surge ran up her body, the knife sent to kill her unborn son faltering. He renewed his attack, and Cortana attempted to shove him backwards, feeling the full brunt of the Gravemind's anger directed towards her. Blindly her hands reached outward, "Jake, help me!" The boy ran to her, the look of panic on his face replaced by intense pain as he grabbed Cortana's outstretched hand, his eyes flickering as he moved his mind to bolster Cortana's defense. The Gravemind gave one last guttural roar of rage before she and Jake at last threw him away, the boy nearly collapsing to the floor as a result of his efforts, his chest heaving up and down heavily. Cortana's knees trembled and she was only dimly aware of the gunslinger's hold on her, and completely unaware of the look of determination on his face. He motioned his head towards Eddie who immediately came and took Roland's place, throwing Cortana's arm over his shoulder. A loud primal screech filtered through the doorway behind them and the gunslinger looked around, his eagle eyes tearing through the dark void.

"Jake," he said, his eyes never moving from the doorway. "Come here son." Jake moved towards him, his eyes still flickering in and out as a result of the mental battle he just waged. They stopped flickering as he saw Roland hand him his satchel, his hands numbly taking. The gunslinger dug into his pockets, removing a pack of cigarettes. He took one out and held it in-between the two remaining fingers of his right hand, dropping the rest of the pack into the satchel.

"Roland?" Jake half asked, half pleaded as he realized what the gunslinger was doing. Roland said nothing, but placed his left hand on the side of Jake's head, his light blue eyes saying what he could not with words. Removing his hand he said, "Eddie to me."

Eddie looked at Cortana and asked, "Are you alright to stand?" Cortana weakly nodded and Eddie dropped her arm from his shoulder, moving towards Roland with deliberate steadiness.

Roland placed his hand on Eddie's shoulder, "You are done now. Take care of them." He squeezed Eddie's shoulder once and lowered his voice to a whisper, "Take care of her." Eddie glanced over his shoulder at Cortana and nodded once. Roland removed his hand and turned his back to stand in the doorway, his eyes just beginning to see movement in the darkness.

"Roland," Eddie said. Roland turned around, irritated, ready to unload his anger on Eddie for questioning his decision. Instead he paused as he saw Eddie stretched out a hand towards him. The gunslinger considered it for a moment, before briefly shaking it, his firm grip only hinting at his hidden strength, before turning back around again. "I don't regret it," Eddie said. "Any of it."

_I do, _Roland thought. _There are many things I regret. _

Cortana stared at Roland's turned back, wanting to say something, anything. All she managed to do was open her mouth slightly before closing it again. Eddie came to her, putting a hand on her shoulder, "We need to move."

"He's choosing me," Cortana said quietly. "He's sacrificing himself for me." Her chest ached and she felt the sudden need to clutch it.

Eddie's head lowered briefly, but he quickly brought it back up again, "Let's not waste it then." He turned and patted Jake on the shoulder who jolted at the touch. The two gunslingers exchanged a look and Jake gave one last glance at his father before drawing both the UNSC pistol and his ruger and heading in the opposite direction of Roland, into the passageway that would lead to their deliverance from this primal evil.

Cortana stood her ground, still wanting to say something, even if it was a lie. She would have lied right then and told the gunslinger that she loved him the same way he loved her, if only because he deserved to hear those words from her even if Cortana did not mean them.

"Go!" Roland said. In all the time that she had known him, even when he had been training her, this was the first time he had ever raised

his voice. It was enough to break the spell that held her feet firmly to the ground, and she moved to follow Eddie and Jake out of the lab.

He waited until he heard the others leave the lab, their fading footsteps bringing both relief and regret to the gunslinger's conscience. Even now he felt the pull of the Tower. Even now he remembered his promise to Aileen all those centuries ago. He knew that if he left his post the others would not question his change of heart, and at least one of them would lay down their lives in order to save him. That was how it always happened, part of the reason why he had lived so long. Aileen had been right, there was something about it, some unnatural ability to draw those to him who were willing to sacrifice themselves so that he could reach The Dark Tower. He dismissed these thoughts and planted his feet more firmly into the ground, striking a match to light his last cigarette. As he inhaled deeply, letting the smoke settle into the depths of his lungs, Roland felt a presence enter his mind.

(You seek salvation Warrior, and with me you shall find it)

_I welcome it, _Roland replied, and he felt the Gravemind pause in thought. _But know this, I have lived long and wandered far, and any grave you share with me shall be a restless one._ The Gravemind growled in response before quietly leaving his mind. The gunslinger widened his stance, his left hand drifting to the widow maker at his side, his right clutching the Horn of Gilead strapped to his shoulder. Through the darkness he could see them, deformed monstrosities fighting with one another as they advanced up through the narrow corridor, each beast wanting to be the first to reach him. Roland gave one last long drag of the cigarette, his hand returning to his holster after he had flicked towards the oncoming horde. If John could slay such beasts, then so could he, at least long enough so that the others, so that she, could escape.

"Come enemy of my cousin, ye spoiled, ye damned, ye deformed, ye lost." He drew his revolver and cocked the hammer back. "I am Roland Deschain, the last gunslinger of Gilead, and I deal in lead."

Then they were upon him, their endless multitudes never ending their assault, never questioning the hunger that dwelt within them, never turning back no matter how many of their brothers were slain. Yet, dauntless, the gunslinger set the slug-horn to his lips and blew.

80. Chapter 80 Leviathan

Chapter 80: Leviathan

Nine Years After the Fall of Gilead (Space/Time Anomaly) Jericho Hill, Outer Baronies, Mid-World

Edoacer Grissom was a mountain of a man. The greatest and most ruthless of John Farson's generals his size was only matched by the great steed he rode, his body covered head to toe in heavy black armor, a great shield strapped across his back and a mighty broad sword at his side. He felt the approach of the man he both hated and needed, and one of the few men he actually feared. The man in black moved his own horse beside Grissom's, surveying the carnage in front

of them. Dozens of the Old People war machines lay strewn about on the battlefield, their burning hulks blackening the air with smoke, the gore of men stuck deep into their treads which had sunk into the now muddied hill. It had not rained for days, the mud created by the blood of men whose bodies littered the battlefield so completely so that one could not take a stride without stepping on one. Through all of this the smell of gunpowder still clung to the air.

"You have your victory," the dark man said, his voice grating on Grissom's ears. "Just as I promised you."

Grissom grunted in disapproval, "What use is victory if I have destroyed my army here. I commanded a force of thousands, and now there are barely a few hundred of us left."

The man in black snickered and had it not been for John Farson's fondness of him Grissom would have attempted to strike him down then and there, "I said you would win, but I did not say how."

Grissom glared at the dark man, his red tinted eyes piercing with an internal fire, "Do not play me for a fool Martin, I know what other name you go by."

If this revelation was meant to intimidate the dark man, it seemed to have the opposite effect. "Which one? I have so many it's sometimes hard to keep track."

Turning his head away from the man in disgust Grissom snarled, "The Covenant Man."

The dark man chuckled, "Ah yes, I have been called that before haven't I?" The man in black turned his attention back to the battlefield, his eyes searching for one body in particular, "Where did he fall?"

Grissom pointed at a pile of corpses fifty meters away, "There. Arrow to the chest."

"And your men did not check to make sure that he was dead?"

Shaking his head slowly Grissom said, "There are some who believe he is a demon."

The dark man tilted his head towards the general, mulling over his words, "I have met both gods and demons, and I tell you now Roland is neither."

"We shall see," Grissom replied, and he moved his horse forward towards the pile, the dark man following closely behind.

A small detail of five men, their own chainmail armor caked with dark red blood, one nursing a gunshot wound to his right arm, guarded the pile of bodies, and the dark man noted with disapproval that they seemed to be keeping their distance from it. When both he and the general arrived the dark man pointed to the man he assumed was in charge, "Pull him out."

The man looked questioning at Walter, and then at Grissom, "Sai?"

"Do it," Grissom growled, his voice a deep gravelly baritone.

The man hesitated one second longer, before motioning to his companions. They sifted through the bodies, throwing corpses aside with little care as to where they landed. The dark man sat up in his saddle when he saw a flash of brown hair, and another smile formed on his face as Roland's lifeless body was dragged out of the pile. The two men that had pulled him out dropped the gunslinger unceremoniously onto the ground, quickly backing away several steps after they did as if they were still afraid of him. The man in black dismounted his horse and swiftly strode over to Roland's body, taking note of the bolt that had dug itself deep into the center of his chest. Setting himself down on one knee Walter placed two fingers on the side of Roland's neck, his smile broadening when he felt no pulse.

"Fare ye well Roland of Gilead. Till we meet in the clearing at the end of the path." As he stood up though, his smile faded into a deep scowl of hatred. With a savage kick the dark man's boot collided with the gunslinger's chest, his head rolling to the other side of his body bent in a strange angle with the force of the impact. Walter continued to kick him, taking joy in the sounds of the gunslinger's ribs breaking one by one under the force of the assault. Once his anger was exhausted the dark man spit in the face of his enemy's corpse, and when he turned back to the soldiers that had been silently watching they took several more steps back. "Throw him in with the others."

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Project Freelancer Biological Research Center,
Thunderclap, Mid-World

The violent blow of the Horn of Gilead, followed closely by the roar of Excalibur struck each member of the ka-tet as if they themselves had been shot, the cold grey walls amplifying the sound so flawlessly so as to make it seem as if Roland was firing his revolver next to them even as they wound themselves deeper into the facility, every sharp turn met with an increasingly insurmountable wall of fear. Even as they fled, even as Cortana's mind raced to lead them out of this death trap, she found that her feet stopped when the gunfire at last faded behind them. Cortana bit deep into the inside of her cheek, her hands opening and closing into to fists as she thought about what the gunslinger's ultimate fate was. Eddie placed a hand on her shoulder, her head jerking up to look at him in response, and he took in the tears that had just begun to form in the corners of her eyes.

"Which way?" he asked patiently, and Cortana turned around to stare at the three passages that were now before them.

"The middle one," Cortana said breathlessly, yet as he moved forward the loud screech of a Flood combat form that came from the depths of the chosen passage way stopped her dead. Quickly she recalculated another route. "The right," but before she could even take another step in that direction another screech sounded, and then another from the passage way on the right. The ground below her began to tremble as if a stampede of elephants were passing through the facility, signaling the approach of the horde, the only avenue of retreat left now backwards towards where Roland had made his stand. Her hand found the sandalwood grip of her revolver and with blinding speed she drew

it, the muzzle leveled at the entrance of the middle passageway, Eddie and Jake's guns leveled at the others.

"We go down the middle one," Eddie said, his voice still calm. "Fight our way through." He turned around, and his eyes were immediately drawn to the vent that Cortana had unwittingly stepped under, her full attention on the primal howls sounding in the deep. He moved without thinking and pushed Cortana out of the way who landed hard on her back. She looked up just in time to see the infection form descend from the vent and land on Eddie's chest. He desperately tried to tear it off, his hands clawing at the creature, but still it burrowed itself into his body. She heard Eddie's screams turn into muffled gurgles, the snap of his bones breaking as his body was morphed into a walking abomination, his once handsome face turned into little more than a grotesque portrait of his formal self as brown biological mush overcame the rest of his body. What had once been Eddie Dean turned on Cortana, and she found at once that she could not bring herself to kill him, shutting her eyes as she waited for the inevitable to come.

The combat form of Eddie was suddenly ripped apart by rounds from Jake's pistols, its body lurching in the other direction as it attempted to attack this new threat, only to fall uselessly on the ground at the boy's feet. Jake ran over to Cortana, his expression cold and merciless. "We need to go." Cortana could only nod as she stood up, her hand once again finding the revolver as they ran down the middle corridor. In the distance she could see the horde advancing, twisted forms of what had once been low men, taheen, and even Brutes racing head long at them, their bodies twisting and convulsing as they scrambled to reach them. Jake tucked both pistols back into the band of his jeans, and sprinted towards the horde, Cortana's heart racing as she tried to run after him, to stop him from doing something that would get him killed.

The boy struck out both hands and the air in front of him shimmered as a physic blast rumbled down the hallway, deformed limbs and heads ripping from torsos, the spear of the horde dulled by the attack. He drew his pistols once more and began to fire, Cortana joining him, both of them still running as they plowed through the remainder of the mob. The last combat form fell at Cortana's hands, the tip of the barrel glowing a soft red due to the speed and the amount of bullets she had fired from it, and at last they reached the door at the end of the passage way, Cortana reaching out her hand and ignoring the cramp forming in her abdomen to open it. The controls sparked as she touched it, and the door slid open only a few inches before a loud groan signaled the failure of the machines that ran it.

Cortana spun back around, eyes widening in fear as she saw the host that had pursued them down the hallway, and she stood as close to Jake as possible, her hand wishing to hold his, as she leveled her revolver once more. They fired, Jake reloading his pistols faster than the old clips could hit the ground, Cortana's hands vanishing as she reloaded her weapon. The Flood came, undaunted by the wall of led hurled at them, clawing over the bodies of their fallen, inching themselves closer and closer to their pray, some firing plasma rifles, others pistols or rifles, the rounds impacting wildly on the door behind Cortana and Jake. A combat form landed at Cortana's feet, one directly behind it and swinging its arm backwards in a wide arc preparing to strike. Jake moved his body in between them and the combat form's arm struck him in the head, his ruger pistol flying out

of his hand and disappearing underneath the ever growing pile of bodies, the boy landing hard on the ground and a gash appearing on his forehead. Cortana fired into the face of the combat form that had struck Jake, a dozen more rising up to take its place, and she felt her back hit the broken door behind her.

The combat forms in front of her suddenly flew apart, the swarm falling to pieces as the wall of a man who stood behind them fired his revolver at the rate of a machine gun. As the last of the Flood fell Cortana could hardly believe what her eyes were telling. Roland stood there, his long gun smoking, bleeding dripping down from a wound in his side and forming a dark red puddle by his feet. Beside her Jake shakily stood, blood from his forehead running down his face and filling his mouth with its vile saltiness. The gunslinger's eyes held steadily on Cortana's electric blue eyes for several moments before he glanced at the broken door.

"Follow me."

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For an hour they battle their way through the facility, the Flood never relenting in its pursuit, never wavering in its blood lust, the will of the Gravemind pushing his necromorph minions onwards as the ka-tet ran. There was no lull, no break in the fighting, and Cortana never had a chance to ask Roland how he had managed to survive. At last they reached the exit, the Flood directly behind him, the undead army advancing with the comfort of their unending multitude. Both Roland and Jake spun on their heels as the ka-tet reached the double doors firing their weapons, their efforts doing little more than to slow the mob's advance, a bolt of plasma sailing towards Cortana's head as she stretched out her hand to touch the controls. She turned her head to avoid the plasma, feeling the heat boil across her skin as it missed her, and when her eyes fell on Roland she saw him fall. A single bullet, slung outward from the collective mass pushing towards them, impacted the center of his chest, ripped through his heart, and exited cleanly out his back.

Her mind flashed back to John falling, his mortal wound caused by a lowly Brute, his true murderer being her. _Callahan, Susannah, John, Eddie, _her conscience raged inside her, the hair on the back of her neck standing on end as blood red lines of code raced up her body, a white glow surrounding her. _They all died because of me. _Jake stood over Roland's body, unaware of the surge of power behind him, focusing only on the Flood that swarmed towards him, his single UNSC pistol unable to stem the tide, desperately pleading for Roland to get back up. The hair on his arms stood on end, and he nearly dropped the pistol as a burst of static electricity ran through him, a wall of white hot glowing hard light suddenly appearing in front of him, blocking off the entire passageway. The barrier did little to deter the Flood, who wailed on the hard light with their fists and tendrils, shooting plasma bolts and bullets which ricocheted off the hard light back into the horde, causing even more to fall down.

The cramp that now racked Cortana's stomach nearly blinded her with pain, and it was everything she could do to keep the wall up, the majority of her mind focused on getting to Roland. She approached the gunslinger and went to feel his pulse, knowing full well by the hole in his chest that there would be none to feel. But before she could place her fingers on his neck, Roland's eyes opened, the light blue

hues as sharp and as vibrant as they had ever been. Wordlessly he stood up, a deep frown mixed with both shame and disappointment on his face. He was in pain, that much was obvious, but he was still walking, still moving after receiving a wound that should have killed him instantly.

Cortana opened her mouth to speak when another cramp hit her, and she nearly collapsed as she tried to stand up, the wall of hard light shimmering as she did. The gunslinger's hands were there in an instant, propping her up. "Can you still open the door?" he asked, his calm voice giving a surreal feel to the entire situation.

"Yes," Cortana said, clutching her side as he guided her to the door's controls. The part of her mind that was not maintaining the wall of hard light, that was not contorted with the sensation of unbearable pain, was focused on one thought. _He's not human. He can't be human. _

The door slid open, Jake limping out after them as Roland led her through it, Cortana's eyes squeezed tight as the pain in her midsection continued. When the door shut she released the wall of hard light, true panic seeping in when the agony did not subside when she did. The gunslinger laid her down on the ground, and placed a hand on her stomach. At most she was three months along, beginning to show, and the gunslinger knew at least enough about biology to understand what these contractions meant.

Cortana's eyes looked at him, tears streaking down her face, "I'm losing him."

81. Chapter 81 Immortal

Chapter 81: Immortal

Nine Years After the Fall of Gilead (Space/Time Anomaly) Jericho Hill, Outer Baronies, Mid-World

It is quiet now. The smoke has mostly settled, the fires of battle now all but worn out, the smell of gun powder and the sound of cannon fire now a distant memory. The grass, once green and vibrant, has been trampled to death by the march of advancing armies, shielded from the sun by the mountains of the dead, to many bodies for the few survivors that were left to ever hope to be able to bury.

We move silently through the field of battle, the final and solemn end to a once proud warrior tradition that had lasted a thousand years, and a regimental flag with the sigil of the lidless red eye fixed in the middle sways gently as we move past. We are transparent, immaterial, mere voyeurs in a world that is not our own, yet still we move through it. For to read and write a story is to go todash in a way, to travel to another reality where anything could be possible.

Our footsteps are not muddied by the soft ground were so much blood had been spilt, faces of young boys, victims in their own way to forces that were far beyond their ability to comprehend, stare up at us. Their lips are slightly parted, eyes unseeing and vacant, expressions pale with the last moments of sheer pain stretched across them. We keep moving, doing our best not to look at them, yet still

we find ourselves stealing glances, and being mortified at the great mortality we are forced to observe.

Do you see it now? There in the middle of the field, right at the base of the long slope, stands a monument of death. This is where the last gunslingers of Gilead were thrown into a pile, their arms and limbs twisted and bent at angles that they were never meant to be in, a few of them still clutching revolvers in their hands, a few with their scalps missing, taken by those who practice such things. There is Jamie De Curry the back of his head mostly blown out and a vulture sitting on his back methodically picking at his brains, Cuthbert Allgood the one that reminded John of Sam with an arrow still stuck deep into his right eye and several more sticking out of his chest, Thomas Whitman whose body had been burned beyond recognition by the weapons of the Old People, and Aileen Ritter who is just now beginning to stir out of the depths of unconsciousness. There are more, people who Roland has known since the age of six, had trained to become gunslingers with under the watchful eye of Cort, people he trusted beyond all others. They are all there. Roland's body lays at the heart of the pile, very much dead, as dead as any man can be, but as we shall soon see together the gunslinger is about to begin his eternal punishment for his many sins.

Death but not for him. Life but not for him.

The wind begins to blow, tugging at our shirts, extinguishing the few flames that still exist, picking up fallen banners and carrying them over the land. It is a harsh wind, a driving wind, one that cannot be stopped and cannot be changed like a speeding train the driver of which may or may not be insane. The bells begin to chime in the midst of the wind. Edgar Allen Poe once wrote about them, though I doubt he knew exactly what he was writing about, and it may be a good thing that you cannot hear them now, for if you did you may just begin to shed tears both of joy and of agony. On top of the whistling wind, on top of the chimes, a drum starts to sound, steady and slow at first but quickly picking up its tempo.

Roland's heart begins to beat again.

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Project Freelancer Biological Research Center,
Thunderclap, Mid-World

The gunslinger placed a hand over Cortana's chest, the pregnant woman too caught up in her own fear to notice or care, arms desperately locked around her waist as another contraction hit her. Her heart was beating furiously, pumping blood faster through her body which was readying itself for the faux birth. Tears were still streaming down her eyes, her mind jumping from one thought to the next as she desperately searched for a solution to stop her oncoming miscarriage. Her eyes at last found Roland's, and the desperate plea in them hurt him in a way that the bullet which had torn through his chest never could. Gently he picked her hand and placed it on his own chest, directly above his still beating heart. Cortana felt the bullet hole, the blood still pouring out of it, but there was little time to question how he could still be alive. There were more important things to attend to.

"Match your heartbeat with mine," he said calmly. If he could somehow

get Cortana out of her panicked state then perhaps the baby would have a chance to survive. As things stood now she would most surely lose him. He felt the presence of Jake beside him, and hoped the boy had enough presence of mind to listen in on his thoughts. _Help her. _He was not sure if the boy had heard him, but thought that he might have as he saw much of the fear leave Cortana's eyes.

Cortana focused on Roland's heartbeat, trying to sync her own up with it. The pain in her abdomen was still intense, and had it not been for her feeling Jake's mind meld with her own she may very well have slipped back into a state of panic. Jake did not send any messages to her, but his mere presence inside her own thoughts was enough to stave off the fear that threatened to consume her. Steadily her heartbeat slowed, her labored breathing ending with it. She felt once last contraction before the pain in her stomach finally ceased. She rubbed her abdomen which had grown in the past months although the swelling could still be hidden underneath her baggy sweat shirt. Once again her eyes met Roland's, "I need to check on him, make sure he's okay."

"Do what you must," Roland replied. He took his hand off her chest, and Cortana took her hand off his. When she pulled her fingers back she saw that they were covered in the gunslinger's blood. Cortana's mind nearly froze when she saw it, remembering how the gunslinger had survived a wound that should have instantly killed him, and had to start the internal cogs of thought up again with a forceful kick. "I can't do it on my own," Cortana said, shaking her head. "I pushed myself too hard in there, and he nearly died because of it."

Roland closed his eyes, fully understanding what Cortana was asking him to do. He dug into his gun belt and pulled out a bullet. After holding it up to Cortana he began to run it through his fingers.

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_ The expanse inside her mind was an endless plane of pure blinding light, the brilliance of which was occasionally enhanced by spikes of data running across it, codes which in their complexity only Cortana could read. She stood there in the in the midst of it all, each pulse of new information like a shot of heroin to her veins, something she both relished and hated, for while she needed new knowledge Cortana understood that she could never be free. Her mind focused and she forced herself to limit her scope of thought, and in this state where she was close to what she had been when Cortana was little more than pulses of data herself it was like forcibly constricting the flow of air to her lungs. _

_More as a mental aid than anything else, a tool to help her concentrate on the task at hand, Cortana brought up a data screen in front of her. Her hands flew across it, now just as white as the light that surrounded her, and she brought up a picture of the fetus that grew inside her. The blood red codes stopped their flow momentarily as she first laid eyes on her son. She was first struck by how small and fragile he looked suspended in her womb, his newly developed fingers curving slightly as if trying to grasp an object that was not there, fingerprints already visible on his hands, eyes ears and nose not yet taking their final shape but still present, and just the barest hint of what would become jet black hair on top of his head. He was little more than two inches long, but he was alive,

and he was hers, and the love she felt for him at this moment was perhaps the only thing that could surpass her love for John. _

_She shook her head, refocusing her attention on what needed to be done, and brought up another screen which cascaded information on her son before her eyes. Biological readings flashed before her and she read each one with determined deliberateness, keeping a watchful eye out for anything that could endanger his health. Something did catch her eye and with a touch the flow of data paused. Her fingers drummed the data screen as she thought about what she had just read, and with another touch Cortana brought up her own biological readings, scrolling through them until she found what she was looking for. As she had expected, Cortana's cells had received some damage from exposure to the radiation present in Thunderclap. Although she now realized that her natural life expectancy had been shortened at least to some degree, it was far from being a lethal dose. Yet as she compared her readings to that of her son it was clear that the radiation had not affected his development at all, as if he had never been exposed to it. Cortana tapped the screen three times, watching as the genetic code of her son, herself, and John's came up. She read the lines of DNA simultaneously, analyzing them. The conclusion was undeniable. _

_He was going to be strong, far stronger than his father had been, with reflexes and speed that would make Kelly look like a tortoise in comparison, his eyesight and hearing better than any gunslinger or Spartan that came before him. He would also inherit his mother's ability to access computer systems, have abilities with the touch that exceeded that of Jake, and his intellect would likely put his mother to shame. _

_Cortana read the DNA, and reread it. She had compared hers and John's genetic code before she realized she was pregnant, but none of the possible genetic scenarios she came up with were anywhere close to this. A low feeling sank into the depths of her heart, and she feared for her son's future. How could he ever be normal? How could he ever play with other children without having to worry about seriously injuring them because he could not control his own strength? How could she expect him to go to school like a normal child when he would be able to think circles around all of his teachers, assuming of course he would be able to go to school at all? Would he be born in mid-world, and if so how many agents of The Crimson King would try to kill him before he could even walk? Two attempts on his life had already been made and Cortana still had six months left in her pregnancy to go. Closing all the screens except for the one containing the image of the fetus, Cortana looked at the face of her son, wishing now more than ever that John was there to tell her everything would be alright. Even when the situation was devoid of hope, those simple words from him were always enough to make her believe. She reached out a hand and gently rubbed the tips of her fingers over the image of her son. _

_Commala dan-tete. The coming of the little god. _

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"I need no attention," Roland insisted. His back was to her, an attempt, Cortana surmised, to hide his expressions from her. She could read them well enough, as subtle as they were, although not as well as she could read John's. A can of biofoam was held in her

hands, another gift from Tet although Nancy had warned her that it was weaker than UNSC grade, Dr. Halsey not being completely able to replicate the formula from scratch, an earnest expression on her face. From her angle she could clearly see where the bullet had exited his back, as well as the wound on his side. "Jake has a cut on his forehead, tend to him."

Cortana's voice was firm as she spoke, "I think a bullet wound should be treated before a scratch." The gunslinger did not answer, nor did he turn around, and Cortana softened her voice, "You helped me save my son and you tried to hold back the Flood in the lab, you saved me and Jake when we were cornered, the least I can doâ€¦"

"I did nothing," Roland said, his voice rising. "Eddie still died."

"That wasn't your fault," Cortana said softly. She reached out to put a hand on his shoulder but Roland shrugged it off.

"He died because I told him to protect you." The gunslinger's tone was accusatory, but the anger was not directed at Cortana, it was directed at himself.

"And do you think he would want you sulking about like this?" Cortana asked. This at last got a reaction out of Roland who glanced behind him at her, before quickly turning his head away. "Take off your shirt." The demand left no room for argument. The gunslinger clenched his fists into tight balls, then worked quickly to remove his shirt, nearly tearing it off in the process. For the first time Cortana looked at his exposed back. Bloody streaks ran down it from the bullet wound, painting the scars which stretched across his exposed skin in thin crisscrossing patterns red, scars that Cortana quickly recognized as coming from the hands of a whip.

Roland could feel her eyes on them and answered her question before she could give it voice, "During training we were either beaten or starved if we failed to complete our lessons, sometimes both." Cortana merely swallowed, unsure of how to respond. Just as she was about to apply the biofoam, she pulled the canister away. There was no need for it, the wound having already mostly healed by itself. She looked at the wound on his side, her eyes widening as she recognized what it was. A Flood infection form had attempted to bury itself into Roland and judging by the size of the injury it should have succeeded. It too had also begun to heal.

"Turn around," Cortana said, unable to prevent the shakiness of her voice.

The gunslinger slowly turned, revealing yet more scars on the rest of his body, some of them similar to the scars displayed on John's, yet one in particular caught her attention. It was a burn mark, similar in shape and location to the one John had received from a plasma bolt just underneath his shoulder. Again, as if he could read her mind like Jake could, Roland answered her unspoken question. "Jericho Hill. The summit of the hill was rocky and we took cover there. They used the weapons of the Old People to try and burn us out."

"Flamethrowers," Cortana whispered, her eyes now wandering to the bullet's entry point in his chest. She had nearly convinced herself

that what she saw back in the facility was merely her eyes playing tricks on her, that Roland could not have been shot in the heart and still have lived. Now as she looked at it there could be no doubt. "Roland these wounds, they should have killed you."

"They should have," Roland said. More than any emotion displayed in his blue bombardier eyes, Cortana saw disappointment most of all.

She rolled the canister of biofoam loosely in her hands, her voice quiet as she spoke, "You can't die can you?"

Roland turned his eyes away from her, his jaw line twitching, "I was suppose to die. I wanted to die."

Cortana closed her eyes, her expression that of a soft sadness, now fully understanding the extent of Roland's curse, to journey to The Dark Tower for all of eternity only to be sent back each time, and even when he tried to sacrifice himself the White would still not allow him to die. Would not allow him to go to the clearing at the end of the path where his family, his gunslingers, where Susan waited in vain for him. _What did you do Roland?_ Cortana thought, _What did you do that was so terrible to deserve this?_ Without realizing it Cortana took Roland's right hand in hers, feeling the missing two digits and his calloused palm. "It's not your fault."

Roland shook his head, "I could have saved her." His eyes still had not met hers and he made no effort to hold Cortana's hand in return. "I could have gone back to save Susan, but instead I chose not to, I chose winning over her life. She risked her life to save mine and I repaid her by letting her be burned to death on a pyre." His eyebrows furrowed as the memories swam over him, "She was pregnant with my child and I chose duty, I chose the Tower, over her, and all that was gained by her death was to delay the Fall of Gilead by twenty months." He slipped his hand out of Cortana's, "Everyone who gets close to me dies." He turned away from her, swiftly putting his blood stained shirt back on. He paused just long enough to retrieve the pack of cigarettes from his satchel before walking away.

82. Chapter 82 Sins of the Father

Chapter 82: Sins of the Father

11:12 A.M., February 9th, 2013 (Gregorian Calendar) Stafford County, Virginia

He was no longer driving a red Ford, having bought a used white Ford Ranger in the beginning of January. Of course the change to white was just a coincidence, along with everything else. It was a good truck, having hardly ever been driven by its previous owner, and at a reasonable price, yet when he had gone to close the deal his credit score had caused him to become uncomfortable. It was not that the credit score was bad, it was actually very good, but it was what those three numbers added up to that had caused him to worry.

With a quick turn of the wheel he pulled into a parking spot, the rush of traffic along the road in front of the parking lot causing the air to be filled with a dull roar, and he quickly exited the truck, crushing his spent cigarette into the pavement as he walked

towards the bank in front of him. Just as he was about to enter the building three numbers written in bold white lettering above the door caught his eye and the writer froze as if struck by a thunderbolt. He had been going to this bank for years, and if you had asked for its address before today he would have likely been able to give it to you, but it was not until now that he had truly noticed it, those three numbers heralding his own entrance into to mid-world in the coming months, just as the story would be near its end. The numbers wereâ€|

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Project Freelancer Biological Research Center,
Thunderclap, Mid-World

When Jake had killed Eddie, or rather what had been Eddie, the expression worn on his face was that of utter ruthlessness. At the time he had killed him without remorse, and without regret. Now though, with the adrenaline of battle leaving his system the full realization of what he had done crept into his conscience as slowly and as surely as the approaching dawn. He may want others to consider him an adult, and in many ways he both acts and talks like one, but we must never forget that at his core Jake is still just a child.

Cortana approached him, Jake either not bothering to acknowledge her or too lost in his own thoughts to sense her presence. Whatever the case may be Cortana did not take it as a good sign. His head was hanging low, his thick blonde hair covering much of his face from Cortana's view, and he was turning the UNSC pistol absentmindedly in his hand over and over again. Gently Cortana reached out and hand and took the pistol from him, Jake offering no resistance, and then knelt down by where Jake was sitting.

"I dropped my ruger," Jake said in a monotone voice.

"I know," Cortana said, placing a hand on his back. Jake made no move to avoid the touch, but also did nothing to recognize the display of affection. She knelt there with her arm around him, waiting for Jake to speak in his own time. When he did speak his voice trembled.

"I killed Eddie."

At this Cortana moved her body so that she was no sitting beside him, trying desperately to look into Jake's eyes, "It wasn't Eddie, not anymore. You can't let yourself think that it was."

Jake shook his head forcefully, "I killed him." His fists clenched and he repeated the words. "I killed him. I killed him. I killed him."

Cortana's arm moved partly in panic and she put a hand on Jake's cheek, turning the boys head so that his eyes met hers. His eyes were blood shot, tears leaking down them in a steady flow, and with Cortana's touch the last of his emotional control broke. He began to sob, his body shaking as he did, and Cortana pulled him into her feeling her own eyes water up as she did.

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They continued to hold each other, even after Jake had stopped crying, a dark wet mark having formed on the front of Cortana's sweat shirt. They were silent, neither wanting to speak, neither knowing what to say, and so they just say there, but while Jake's mind was completely blank Cortana's had continued to work. Her mind always worked.

"Jake," she said, breaking the self imposed silence. "I need you to do something for me." Jake merely looked up at her his eyes still red, but Cortana could tell that he was listening. "I need you to read my mind. I need you to read all of it." Jake looked confused, his expression silently asking if Cortana was sure with her request. She gave a brief nod, but Jake still looked hesitant. At first it was as if Jake was touching something hot with his hand, his mind going in and out of Cortana's with great reluctance. When he fully committed to the act Cortana felt a rush of ice cold mercury flood her mind. She felt Jake sift through her thoughts, Cortana throwing him up internal street signs in order to point him in the right direction. When he did find what Cortana wanted him to Jake read over it slowly. Then he stopped, Cortana feeling a brief but sharp spike followed by a sensation similar to rewinding an old VHS. This process repeated several times, Jake's eyes becoming wider and his face paler as he went.

(No) he said, his thoughts reverberating across the sides of Cortana's skull. He turned his attention towards Roland who was standing off in the distance with smoke rolling out of his mouth. (He had to know. There is no way he couldn't have known). Cortana felt Jake's mind begin to leave hers and she attempted to grab a hold of it, to stop him from doing what she thought he was going to do.

Jake, don't!, she mentally shouted, but Jake ignored her and Cortana felt the cold mercury drain from her mind. She whipped her head around to look at Roland, the gunslinger standing fifty meters away with his back to him, smoke rising over his head. When Jake entered his mind he gave no reaction other than a slight pause as he raised a lit cigarette back up to his lips, but for Cortana the damage had already been done. She turned back to Jake, his eyes flickering furiously, tear tracks still visible on his face. When he left Roland's mind it was almost as if he had been dropped several feet, his body shaking like somebody had put an ice cold soda can on the back of his neck.

"He didn't know," Jake said in a low whisper. "How could he not know he was immortal?" In Cortana's mind he added, (How could he not know he has been to The Dark Tower before?)

"Because," Cortana said, turning her head back around to look at the gunslinger, wondering just how much trust had been broken by what Jake had done. "He didn't want to know."

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With a mental nudge Mordred opened the sealed entrance to the Old People's underground research facility, and the soft pitter patter of his bare feet was drowned out by the sound of the doors closing behind him as he walked deeper in to the Gravemind's lair. He was in

his late teens now, his jet black hair which had never been cut hanging over his light blue eyes, and even with the tattered clothes that just barely fit him and dirt caked onto the back of his legs no one who looked at him now would ever be able to mistake him as anything other than royalty. Even so his life had been far from luxurious, having nearly died of thirst and hunger along with the ka-tet as they crossed the most barren part of Thunderclap, the animals that he could hunt far too few in number to adequately sustain him. Yet even as his physical body deteriorated, his mind continued to grow.

Mordred moved through the winding corridors, feeling the eyes on him but caring little about who had sent them. The Crimson King may have released Leviathan from his immaterial prison so that the demon could gain control over the virulent parasite, but at least until very recently he had made no attempt to control him. Mordred was unsure about the actual origins of the Gravemind himself, knew that he could quite possibly be just a limb on the body of a much larger beast, but so what if he was. That did not change the fact that Mordred believed himself to be the fulfillment of the ancient prophecy, the fated union between both science and magic, the true heir of Arthur Eld who would rule over the nothingness that would come back into being once the Tower fell. Leviathan was born in the nothingness, and so Mordred held dominion over him.

A path paved in the corpses of the undead led Mordred into the main lab, shell casings from his father's revolver littering the floor. Mordred surveyed the scene, the lab filled with even more bodies than the corridor, mutated arms and legs separated from the bodies that once carried them squishing underneath Mordred's feet. He could sense that this was where his father had his stand, a futile effort to buy the others time to escape. He saw blood in large dark splotches decorating the exit on the opposite side of the room, and from the smell Mordred knew that it belonged to Roland. He frowned, finding no body, the only conclusion being that his father had somehow managed to survive. _No matter, _Mordred thought. _The old man's time will come._

He moved out of the lab, this new hallway devoid of bodies, but he could tell from the lingering scent that the ka-tet had made their way through here. It was at the end of this hallway where the paths divided into three, that he came across the body of Eddie Dean, his once handsome face twisted and contorted into a portrait of pure pain, his neck broken and pushed aside in order to allow room for the infection form to rest comfortably. Mordred looked down at the shell casings that surrounded the body, rolling one over with the tip of his big toe. Another of the ka-tet was dead, but it was far from being the person he wanted dead the most. He still held some fear of his father, but did not consider the aging gunslinger to be his biggest threat. No, the person he feared the most, the person that could be the end of him if Mordred allowed it, had yet to be born. It was this child wrapped deeply inside the womb of his mother that caused Mordred to ask very uncomfortable questions about his own destiny to inherit all. The usurper needed to be killed, sooner rather than later. Mordred moved his toe off of the shell casing and placed it on the body of Eddie Dean, rolling the body over so that he could have a better look at what was left of the man's face. The ka-tet had lost another, and Mordred found that he had mixed feelings on the subject. The ka-tet had grown weaker with each passing death, but by the same token they had also grown stronger. Existence as

always was full of paradoxes.

Satisfied that he had seen all that he needed to, almost certain that the others had managed to make it out of the facility alive, Mordred headed down the left corridor, all the time becoming increasingly aware of the multitude of eyes following his every movement.

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The room was vast, vaulted ceilings stretching high into the foundations of the mountain it was underneath, the entire expanse cast in a corrupting darkness with the exception of one failing florescent light hanging over the creature that Mordred had come to talk to. When he first saw the Gravemind, which was now in little more than its proto state, an indecipherable mass of corpses that had been welded together to form one complete being, its roots dug deep into the side of the cave, all he could feel was disgust. This was the great Leviathan, a being who in another world had once brought an entire galaxy to its knees, now reduced to little more than The Crimson King's caged pet, like Shelob who guarded the forgotten pass into Mordor high above Minas Morgul.

Mordred stood in front of the Gravemind, arms crossed and eyebrows heavily furrowed, "You failed."

The Gravemind growled and in the darkness Mordred could see movement. Molten iron flooded Mordred's mind, but unlike Cortana he found the sensation to be more than bearable. (You said that the armored casket would not be here).

Mordred blinked, momentarily confused as his mind worked. The Gravemind's statement revealed two things to him, that the Gravemind had confused Roland for John which meant that he had been weakened from the battle on and above the Ark far more than Mordred had anticipated, and that this creature was actually afraid of the Spartan. Even if one of those things were true it would have sealed the Gravemind's fate in Mordred's mind, but as things stood Mordred was content with allowing Leviathan to dig his own grave even further. "So what if he was? You were only required to kill an unborn child, and you could not even manage that." Mordred tilted his head, the beginnings of a smile on his face, "It was I who cloaked your presence from the boy, I who wiped the Old People's computers clean so that the Intellect would not be warned of your presence here. All you had to do is feed."

(It is but a minor defeat, soon to be forgotten in my coming triumph.)

"My triumph," Mordred corrected. "Not yours. The Crimson King may be fond of your insufferable ego, but to me you are of little use." There was more movement in the dark, combat and Flood pure forms inching their way towards the talking pair. Sensing what Leviathan was planning he placed his own mind into the creature, quickly running into a stout mental barrier. Mordred paused for a moment, and then like all besieging armies when faced with an impenetrable wall he simply slipped around it, all while leaving the Gravemind completely unaware of his intrusion. The mind was nothing more than a biological computer, and Mordred understood how both worked extremely well. With silent efficiency he put his own plan into motion.

(You are but a child in a man's body whose ancestors where nothing more than food for my gullet) The Gravemind said, his calm demeanor fading into one of increasing rage. (I have witnessed the rise and fall of a thousand civilizations, was there before existence came into being, and will remain long after it has been destroyed. I serve no one.)

"You serve me," Mordred replied. "Or you will not exist at all." The Flood was now fully visible, circling Mordred in a tight ring, ready to pounce when Leviathan gave his command. Mordred looked at them, and could not help but broaden his smile, "You are but an aging relic, and Iâ€" He uncrossed his arms and spread them apart "I am the coming of the little god."

(Petulant child!) The Gravemind roared, and then to his undead minions, (Feast upon his bones!) But the horde did not move, watching as their new master lowered his arms to his side. The Gravemind roared more commands, but Mordred paid no heed to them, turning his back and heading towards the exit. With a simple nod the Flood parted to allow him to pass, deformed heads turning as he walked. The door opened as he approached and Mordred stepped through.

"Kill him," he said, and with that the door slammed shut.

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(Space/Time Anomaly) Discordia Badlands, Thunderclap, Mid-World

It had taken them months to walk back up the mountain chain to where they could find the beam again, but find it they did, and Cortana felt the tension in her shoulders noticeably ease when she saw it passing overhead once again. Both animals to hunt and fresh water were more plentiful here, but not by much, and even though Cortana hated the cynical thought the death of Eddie had made the odds of both her and Jake surviving in the wilderness more likely. Cortana's stomach was now fully swollen and the gun belt no longer fit on her, so she had to settle for keeping the long gun in the front pocket of her sweat shirt.

Her condition was causing the ka-tet to slow down, she knew that and felt both guilt and an increasing anxiousness to find John before her child came to term. He was still out there, she was sure of that, and that knowledge was one of the things that had kept her going. Roland had grown mostly quiet, speaking to them only when it was necessary, usually inquiring about Cortana's health. When they traveled he walked ahead of them, never more than a few meters ahead, but still apart from her and Jake, and Cortana understood that the gunslinger was distancing himself from them both physically and emotionally. Whether this was for his benefit or theirs Cortana could not tell.

Jake too had been quiet at first, but was gradually participating more in the mostly one sided conversations she had with him. Cortana tactfully stayed away from the subject of Eddie, willing to let the boy bring it up in his own time. He was strong, Cortana knew that, and eventually he would recover from his grief, but although his own guilt would ebb in time it would still always remain.

And so she talked to him about her own theories about mid-world, and sometimes even about existence in general. She wasn't sure exactly how many of her theories were correct, and suspected that most of them were wrong, but Jake still seemed to like listening to them.

"Jake, have you ever heard of the Matter of France?" she asked him, and to her surprise the boy nodded.

"It's a bit like the Legends of King Arthur for France," he said. When Cortana raised a curious eyebrow at him he added, "The private school I use to go to was pretty tough."

Cortana smiled at him, "Well you were always a smart kid. Do you know exactly what it is about?"

"Not really," Jake admitted.

"Well," Cortana said. "It's a collection of myths and legends with a little bit of actually history thrown in for good measure about the origins of France, mostly centering around Charlemagne the first Holy Roman Emperor. The most famous of these stories is the Song of Roland written by an unknown author in 1170 A.D." She took a breath, looking at the gunslinger ahead of them for any sort of reaction. There was a small one, a slight twitch of the head back towards them, and it was enough to tell Cortana that he was paying attention. "In these stories there were three swords, each considered to be as powerful as Excalibur. Their names were Joyeuse, Durendal, and Cortana." Jake turned his head fully towards her as well as Roland, both now listening attentively and waiting for Cortana to continue. "Joyeuse went to Charlemagne, Cortana to Ogier the Dane, and Durendal to Roland the greatest of Charlemagne's knights. The Song of Roland went on to be the main inspiration for Robert Browning's Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came which went on to inspire Stephen King to write his novel The Gunslinger. Bungie was inspired by the Song of Roland and included Durendal as a main character in their video game Marathon," she looked at Jake who was now listening with rapt attention. "And well I guess you can figure out for yourself where my name came from. My point is that this story we are now in is not just big, it's massive. Far more massive than I can even begin to comprehend. Joseph is just one and the latest of thousands of writers that it has taken to tell this story, and each one was necessary in order to make this happen." She turned to Roland who now had his head facing forward once more but was still listening, "Each one is necessary for Roland to reach The Dark Tower."

Jake looked down at his feet, watching as each footstep moved him closer to the Castle of The Crimson King. They were only a few days out now, provided that time did not see fit to slip once more, and the final confrontation with the son of Arthur Eld loomed over them all. Slowly he brought his head up to look at the back of his father. (He's in hell isn't he?)

_Yes, _Cortana said. It was the closest word she could come up with when it came to describing Roland's condition, for hell in its most basic definition means eternal punishment. To Cortana though, the punishment far exceeded the crime, and she wondered if the White's motivation was merely to punish the gunslinger for all eternity, or to prepare him for something.

(For you) Jake thought. Cortana looked at him through the corners of her eyes. She had forgotten that Jake was in her mind, and wondered briefly if John had ever felt that way when she was in his neural lace. (The White was getting him ready for you. You and John have to be new to the story)

_I think your right, _Cortana said. _He had to be close to not being sent back last time. I'm almost certain that Stephen King's Dark Tower series was telling the story of his last trip to the Tower. _Of course that thought brought up another question. Walter had told her that there were an infinite number of versions of John, although only one was descended from Arthur Eld. That meant that there were an infinite number of versions of Callahan, Susannah, and Eddie, although as far as Jake went she thoughtâ€¦

(You think I'm the same one each time.) Jake finished her thought for her. (There might be different versions of me, but this "me" is always the same one that shows up.) He had spent a great deal of time in Cortana's thoughts since Eddie's death, and was able to anticipate what she was going to say almost before she thought about saying it. (I'm The Sailor, looking for his purpose.) Then for a wonder he actually made a small smile, (I think I know what that purpose is)

_What? _Cortana asked, again looking at him through the corners of her eyes.

(You) Jake said, now looking at her. (My real name is John Chambers after all)

Cortana returned the smile, _I'm a little old for you don't you think?_

(Never said I loved you that way) Jake replied. His smile turned into a smirk, (Besides, technically you are too young for me). Cortana could not help herself. She nudged him in the shoulder with her elbow, and was certain that if Roland had not been there he would have laughed. The smirk slowly left his face and his features returned to being solemn as he looked once more at the gunslinger, (It had to be enough right? I mean he tried to sacrifice himself, and he didn't know he couldn't die)

_I don't know, _Cortana said. _I just don't know. _Jake looked, or rather felt in Cortana's mind, as if he was about to reply, when he his body suddenly shook as if he was in the middle of a seizure, his eyes expanding and contracting rapidly. As quickly as the fit started, Cortana holding his shoulders and the gunslinger having spun around on his heels, it ended.

Jake's eyes grew wide, "He is insane. He is completely insane."

"What is it?" Roland asked. He thought he knew what Jake had saw, had contemplated doing it himself over the past several months if it meant letting Jake and Cortana survive, for he was certain if they remained with him they would die. Of course, being immortal automatically left some options off the table.

Jake raised his eyes and a cold shiver ran up his spine, "The Crimson King, he's killing everyone."

83. Chapter 83 The Crimson King

Chapter 83: The Crimson King

_ The mobile above the crib sang a soft nursery rhyme accompanied by the rhythmic grinding of internal gears, delicate images of sheep, stars, and the moon swinging in a wide arch over the child's head. In the background a radio played, the man's voice announcing the beginning of a new age in human history, a new age of total annihilation. In some world humanity would pass this test of mutual destruction, in others they would fail miserably, but for now Cortana just stood in the doorway looking at the sleeping form of her son and only vaguely heard the words coming out of the radio._

That bomb has more power than twenty tons of TNT. The Japanese began the war at Pearl Harbor. They have repaid many-foldâ€¦|

_She felt a presence behind her and the man's voice drowned completely from her mind, and without looking behind her Cortana leaned into John, his hard muscles growing soft with her touch. "Come to haunt my dreams again?" she asked. _

_ "You are the one that keeps dreaming of me," John replied. His arms wrapped around her and Cortana closed her eyes, feeling almost content if it were not for one undeniable truth. _

_ "You almost feel real," Cortana said as she leaned her head into his chest. "If this dream were any more convincing I would believe that you were."_

_ "I wish I was," John said. She turned her head to look up at him and could see the beginnings of stubble around his chin. _

_ She looked around the room, eyes scanning furniture and toys that rightly belonged in a museum, or buried deep in a collector's forgotten warehouse, "Mid twentieth century?" she asked. _

_ John nodded, "It's where you wanted to go."_

_ "But not where you wanted to go," Cortana said, gently placing a hand against his cheek, fingertips brushing up against his short hair. _

_ John gave a small smile, his gaze moving from her to his sleeping son, "I could get use to this."_

_ "I doubt it," Cortana said, smirking. "You would get bored within a few months, have run off and go blow something up."_

_ While the rest of his face remained unmoved by what Cortana said, his eyes gave off a spark of fake indignation, "You don't think I could be a civilian?"_

_ "Nope," Cortana said, running the palm of her hand across his stubble. "You can't even do a five o'clock shadow right."_

_ John reached up his own hand and grabbed Cortana's, pulling it away from his face and bringing it down where he continued to hold it.

"There is a forest." Cortana stared at him, mouth opening slightly as if to speak, but John continued talking. "If you can get past The Crimson King's castle there is a forest. If you can make it there you should be okay for winter." He moved his hand from hers and placed it on her stomach which had now regained the look of a woman who was six months pregnant. She turned her head around quickly only to see that the image of her son had vanished from the crib. Slowly she turned back around, hanging on to John's every word. "If you can make it there," his eyes tore into hers, and for a moment they looked solid, more solid than they ever could be in a dream, their blue hues shining with self awareness. "I will be there."_

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A boot to her foot woke Cortana up, the vision of John's eyes replaced by that of Roland's. The gunslinger gave a wordless curt nod upon seeing that Cortana was awake. She stood up, knees and legs aching as she did, the first blisters she had since first coming to mid-world burning angrily on her feet. The morning air chilled her skin, a cold that was not yet deadly, but still seeped into her very bones and sapped away her strength, a mere taste of the true arctic chill that was to come. She looked upon the horizon, a thick trail of black smoke curling upwards where the castle of The Crimson King was suppose to be. The dream could be little more than wishful thinking, but Cortana felt rather than knew that John had somehow been able to send a message to her. That this was the last hurtle she would have to cross before being able to see her Spartan again.

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Brute honor guards lined the bridge leading into the town styled after a medieval city, their ornamental spears thrust deep into their abdomens, alien blood streaking across the cobblestone bridge and sticking to the bottom of the ka-tet's boots. Beyond the bridge lay the town proper, wooden buildings still smoldering in their blackened out ruins, bodies of taheen and can-toi hanging by their necks on rope tied to street lights, the bodies of Grunts littering the streets their bodies charred by the detonation of plasma grenades, humans piled into alleyways with self inflicted gunshot wounds against their temples. Yet more than the piles of dead bodies, more than the echoes of a mass suicide, more than the crows which circled endlessly in black clouds in the sky occasionally swooping down in order to claim their pound of flesh, more than all of that Cortana was taken by the silence. It permeated the air, thick enough to where Cortana could feel it brush up against her skin as she and the others walked through the streets, the silence of Roland and Jake as they calmly surveyed their surroundings adding to its tangibility. In the distance stood the castle of The Crimson King, looming like a red sun in the otherwise sunless sky, the stench of death seeming to originate from its gates rather than from the corpses that surrounded them. They moved towards it, and even the thud of their boots on the streets seemed to be muted. At the end of the main street was a broad arch made of slate grey stone, a wide courtyard visible on the other side. They walked through the arch, avoiding even more bodies swinging by their necks on ropes as they did, tongues and eyes bulging out on the ones that had not yet had theirs stolen by the crows. The courtyard itself was mostly absent of bodies, with only a few scattered human remains marring the surface of the once grand plaza, another stone bridge leading towards the very gates of the castle itself. But something else was there, something that caused

all three remaining members of the ka-tet to momentarily forget the carnage that surrounded them or the fortress that taunted them in the distance. There in the middle of the courtyard stood three figures, two of which the ka-tet was very familiar with, one they had only heard about.

Stephen King was the first to speak, getting on one knee as he did, "Hile gunslingers."

Eric Nylund followed, "Hile Roland dinh of mid-world."

Cor Tenebrae was the last, standing in between the two other writers, Stephen King on his left and Eric Nylund on his right. "Hile Roland, King of All World."

>Eric Nylund turned his head towards Joseph and Stephen King, "Did I really have to say that?"<p>

"Yes," Stephen King said impatiently. "It's a formal greeting."

"Think of it as calling Roland by his rank," Joseph said. He looked at Cortana and then back at Nylund. "So what do you think?"

"She's different then how I originally imagined her," Nylund said, looking Cortana over. "I originally had her looking like the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti, although I suppose her appearance has changed more than any other Halo character. Certainly didn't ever imagine her as being pregnant."

"That's what happens when you write for video games," Stephen King said. "If you had written your own original stories you would have had more control over her appearance."

Eric Nylund scowled at Stephen King, "I have written my own novels."

Stephen King smirked and turned to Joseph, "Can you name any of them?"

Joseph shook his head, "Not really."

"See?" Stephen King said. "Face it all your going to be known for is writing for Halo."

"Better than being known for not being able to finish a story to save his life," Eric Nylund retorted. He gestured with his hand at the castle in the distance, "Or for writing stories that are just plain weird."

"It's not weird," Stephen King said. "It's called imagination. Maybe if you stopped playing video games you would have it."

Eric Nylund's eyebrows furrowed heavily, his own scowl deepening, "I bet you can't even tell me what genre the Dark Tower books are."

"Science fiction fantasy western horror," Stephen King replied, listing off the genres as if they were all one word.

"Would you two quit it," Joseph said, rubbing his temples. He looked

up at the ka-tet, a pained expression on his face, "These guys have been at it ever since I brought them here."

"Ever since you kidnapped us," Nylund corrected. "And I'm still not convinced that you are not insane."

Joseph pointed pleadingly at Roland, Jake, and Cortana, "They are right there. What more convincing do you need?"

"A lot more," Nylund said. "Like a few weeks in a mental hospital more."

Cortana watched them, struggling to find her voice. Beside her it was Roland who gave voice to her question. "Where is he?"

The three writers looked up, now distracted from their own arguing. "The Crimson King?" Stephen King asked, and Roland nodded. "He's abdicated, if you want to put it nicely."

"If you don't want to put it nicely," Joseph said. "He knew he couldn't beat you, so he killed himself along with everyone else here."

"A bit anti-climatic," Eric Nylund said. "I would have at least expected us to see some final epic battle, but no he decides to off himself."

"That's the point," Joseph said patiently. "He didn't want to give them the satisfaction of beating him."

"Still disappointing," Nylund said.

Before another argument could take place, Cortana found her voice, "What are you doing here? You said you couldn't help us." She directed her question at Joseph, her sharp blue eyes full of accusation.

Joseph shrugged, "Changed my mind." He motioned at the ground in front of him, seven wicker baskets displayed in front of the three writers. Cortana blinked. She had not noticed them before, but now that she was looking at the baskets she wondered how she could not have noticed. They were filled with supplies, food and water bottles piled high and threatening to fall out, and it seemed that every single thing that Cortana had craved since the start of her pregnancy was present there. The other baskets were full of clothes, thick winter jackets and gloves, insulated socks, large blue and white blankets. There was one basket though that caught Cortana's attention more than any other. This was filled with diapers, baby formula, small blue baby clothes, and if she looked hard enough she could almost see the tip of the very mobile that had been in her dream. "Thought you could use this stuff. Winter is coming after all."

"So now you're quoting Game of Thrones," Stephen King said.

"Like your one to talk," Nylund replied before Joseph could make his own retort. "Besides that's a good show." He turned his attention back to Cortana, "So are you going to take it?"

Before Cortana could reply what would have surely been an enthusiastic yes, Roland answered for her, "We have both food and

clothing, and require neither from you." Cortana looked at him with an expression filled with puzzlement and anger. Sure they were better off now than they were, but not by much, and they certainly did not have the supplies necessary to take care of a new born baby. The three writers on their part looked equally stunned.

"It will be a winter birth," Joseph said, almost pleadingly, his eyes fixed squarely on Cortana. "If you don't take these supplies he'll die."

Cortana did not even realize that she had taken the first step towards the baskets, but Jake's thrown up arm prevented her from moving closer, and as she looked at the boy she saw his eyes start to flicker, his expression cold and unsympathetic. For the gunslinger's part, his voice held more anger in it than when he John and Eddie had caught the men who had chased Jake in the underground of the Dixie Pig, "Give up your glammer."

Eric Nylund looked confused, unfamiliar with the High Speech word that meant magic, but the other two knew what it meant all too well. Stephen King replied calmly, "No glammer gunslinger, just trying tooâ€¦" A bullet through his throat cut his sentence short, and Stephen King grasped at it as his body twisted backwards. The second shot, which occurred nearly simultaneously as the first, ripped through Eric Nylund's chest, the man flying backwards with a strangled shout. Joseph stared at the bodies of the two other writers, his face placid and non caring. Roland closed the distance, reloading two bullets in his gun with a quick flip of his wrist, hands momentarily disappearing as he did. He snatched his hand outwards, and as his fingers wrapped around the writer's collar and drug him to his feet, the spell broke.

In Roland's clutches was an old man with dirty grey hair, fresh acne across his yellow complexion, and the sunken eyes of a man who was dying of radiation poisoning. He stood there on legs that could barely hold him up, the gunslinger's bombardier eyes threatening to extinguish what life remained, and still he smiled.

"Who are you?" the gunslinger demanded.

"Rando Thoughtful, The Crimson King's Minister of State." His voice was wheezy and came out in a breathless whisper, but still he remained calm even as Roland sunk the muzzle of the revolver deeper into his gut.

"And they?" Roland asked, gesturing his head at the bodies of Eric Nylund and Stephen King. Cortana noticed that even with fresh bullet wounds neither body bled.

"Just glammer as you and the boy saw," Thoughtful said. He looked past Roland at the boy, "You are trig Jake of New York. Trig delah."

"He was trying to kill her," Jake said. He still had his arm outstretched in front of Cortana as if trying to shield her from any more illusions.

"That I was," Thoughtful admitted, not sounding the least bit remorseful. "See for yourself."

Roland's boot heel collided with the nearest basket, and as the contents spilled over Cortana felt her stomach give a violent lurch. Severed human limbs and legs tumbled onto the cobblestone courtyard, fresh maggots and egg bearing flies swarming around them, and in the midst of the carnage a single snake it's fangs bared and skin a poisonous green ivory slithered out, making its way towards the river and the red castle beyond. It took all of Roland's considerable will not to choke the life out of Thoughtful then and there.

He gritted his teeth and repeated his question from earlier, "Where is he?"

"I told you," Thoughtful said calmly. "He killed himself."

"Shut your fool's mouth," the gunslinger hissed. "I did not ask if he was alive, I asked where he went."

"The Dark Tower," Thoughtful said simply. Again he looked at Cortana, "Same as your Spartan, although I doubt even he could handle the Red king alone." At these words Cortana's heart threatened to quit on her all together. Turning his attention back to Roland he said, "Kill me now if you must, for the king has put a spell on this place. You three may leave or enter as you wish, but I must remain with the rest of his servants."

Roland shook his head, "No." With a shove he pushed Thoughtful backwards, the old man falling flat on his back. As Roland went to turn his back on the man though, Thoughtful moved with a speed and strength that went far beyond his decaying appearance. He grasped at the gunslinger's poncho, eyes wild, and both knees planted firmly on the ground in a supplicating manner.

"Please," he pleaded. "You must kill me. He's coming, commala dan-tete, your son Roland of Gilead." He continued to tug at the poncho, eyes full of a primitive fear that Cortana knew all too well. "The king showed me what Mordred can do. He doesn't just feed, he gets into your head and," his body shuddered at memory of what he had witnessed. "He tears your mind limb from limb and leaves just enough of your sanity intact so that you can fully comprehend what he does to your body. You must kill me!"

Roland's fist connected with the man's jaw, blood and teeth spewing out of his mouth and sending the old man flying backwards once more. With little more than a brief pause Thoughtful rose up and went to fall on his knees once more at Roland's feet when a single gunshot ran out. Thoughtful's body seized up, twisted backward on the one knee that was already on the ground, and thudded on to the courtyard with a hole clean through his head, his legs twitching every few seconds.

Roland spun around, his eyes going immediately to the smoking revolver in Cortana's hand, "That was more than what he deserved."

"Yes," Cortana admitted quietly. She reloaded the spent bullet and tucked the gun back into the front pocket of her sweatshirt. "But nobody deserves what a being like Mordred would have done to him. I know that better than most."

Roland studied her, rolling her words over in his head, reflecting on

her own story. Reluctantly he nodded his agreement; even though the more ruthless part of him still thought that they should have left Thoughtful alive, if only because what he had tried to do to her.

Cortana gazed upward at the rising parapets of The Crimson King's castle, her thoughts going to last night's dream and Thoughtful's own words, "He's alive." A sudden rush of hope filled her, "He really is alive."

At first Jake thought she was talking about The Crimson King, but a brief sweep of her mind told him different. "John," he said. A small smile crept across his lips, "He is out there."

Cortana nodded, turning to Roland as she did, "Once we move beyond the castle, is there a forest?"

"Mayhap," Roland said. "The maps of Thunderclap in Gilead were few and it has been centuries since I've looked at themâ€|"

"Is there a forest?" Cortana repeated, making it sound more like a demand than a question.

Roland looked at her curiously, "Aye, if I remember correctly."

"Good," Cortana said. Her heart was beating faster and she struggled to control it. "Then let's get moving, we don't have a lot of time to waste. Thoughtful was right, winter is coming."

84. Chapter 84 Winter

Chapter 84: Winter

March 13th 2013 (Gregorian Calendar) Stafford, Virginia

It had snowed, and Joseph silently prayed to whatever gods existed, the Man Jesus, and the White that it had. He did not pray to ka, there was no use in that for ka never listens. He stood there in the boots he had owned for four years, boots that had a twim in another world where they were worn by a women who had walked a thousand wheels while pregnant in search of the man she loved. His boots had never done anything so noble, but perhaps today they came as close as they ever would.

December 19th 2012, that is when the changes began. That is when he had begun hearing her voice along with the one that urged him to write the story, that was when he had started to drink his coffee black like her even though up until that point he had always used tons of cream and sugar, that was when he had quite drinking, and that was when he first started to feel happy again in a long time.

He knew things now, more than he previously had. He knew if Roland would be sent back from The Dark Tower or not, he knew the exact date of the birth of Cortana's son, he knew for certain that she would find her Spartan, and he knew John's last name. When his last name came to him the answer was so obvious he wondered why he had not figured it out before.

This snowfall would mean he would miss three days off work, three days without getting paid, but in this moment he could care less because right now he is doing something more important. He was at his parent's house now, in the woods behind his parents house at the bottom of a short but steep hill holding a blue sled. When his sister had handed it to him, herself taking an orange one, he gave her a look.

"Why do I get the blue one?"

His sister, who was around the same age as Jake (the writer had a hard time getting over this fact. She still acted so much like a kid) looked at him as if he had asked the craziest question in the world. Like it should be obvious why he was handed the blue one. "Cuz," she said. That was the only explanation she had given, and the writer supposed that was the only explanation that was needed.

He did not do much sledding himself, mostly because it was far more fun to just sit back and watch his sister take more than her fair share of turns. Her sled moved slowly at first, steadily gaining speed until she was a pink and orange blur moving across the white landscape, cold winter air rushing past her unprotected ears and causing her hair to trail behind her. Three quarters of the way down the hill her sled suddenly turned over, and he laughed at the expression on her face as she tumbled head first into the snow.

"What did you do that for?" he asked, a satisfied smirk on his face.

His sister slowly got up and brushed the snow off the front of her pink jacket, a look of pure indignation on her face. "I didn't mean to you butthead."

Butthead, her favorite insult.

The writer wasted no time in throwing a tightly packed snowball at her, striking her turned back as she made a failed attempt to dodge. She bent down swiftly and packed her own snowball, hurling it at him with all her might. The writer easily sidestepped the oncoming projectile, giving her a look that meant only one thing. Giggling she grabbed her sled and began running up the hill, quick on her feet but not too quick to avoid the snow slung at her back as she ran.

In the distance a thunderous crack sounded through the woods, and both the writer and his sister stopped to look up in the direction it had come from.

"Was that a gunshot?" she asked. Her voice seemed to express little concern if it was.

"Tree branch breaking," the writer replied.

She shook her head, "Daddy says he thought he saw hunters out here a few days ago.

_I have no doubt that he did, _the writer thought. "I saw the tree branch break. We're okay."

"Alright." The subject was soon forgotten by her and she began to run up the hill once more.

The writer stood there, watching as his sister made more ill fated runs down the hill. She was here. He could feel her. This was not the first time, and he doubted that it would be the last. His father had seen hunters, he was sure about that, but he was also sure that his dad had not fully realized what he had witnessed.

There was a song stuck in his head, and it played of its own accord even as he tried to put the thoughts of mid-world behind him and just focus on his day. This had happened once before, when "I Was Only Nineteen" was stuck in his head so badly that he had listened to it a dozen times a day, and it was only after writing about it that he was able to kick it out of his mind and partially restore his sanity. Now another song was there, and he knew that Cortana was going to sing again.

Above him the wind began to pick up, pine trees swaying and threatening to break, the snow

(Space/Time Anomaly) White Lands of Empathica,
Mid-World

glistening off their branches and reflecting the pale sunlight. Far below the white and slate gray canopy of winter a doe, barely out of her adolescence, walked gently across the snow covered forest. The frozen precipitation crunched softly beneath her hooves leaving deep tracks that would disappear after the next snowfall. She meandered along a path that was both familiar and comforting, little suspecting that she was being watched. Arriving at her destination the doe bent her head to take a drink from a flowing stream choked with ice but still bubbling merrily enough to allow her mouth access. The ice cold water had just begun to trickle down her throat when a sudden searing pain entered the side of her head. She never heard the sound of the gun, or the whine of the bullet that struck her. All she could do was feel, and then that too went away.

Two figures raced towards the fallen doe, looking much like deer themselves with the skins draped over their shoulders, the best attempt they could make to keep the burning cold away. Another figure trailed behind them, marching through the snow steadily, the burden she carried hampering her movements. Roland descended upon the deer, his own hunting knife slashing through the doe's throat so as to end any suffering she might still be enduring, and then slicing through her stomach. Thick steam rose out of the deer's body, and the gunslinger plunged his hands into the warmth as he began to prepare the kill. Jake for his part darted from tree to tree, being able to spot the driest of kindling even in this frozen climate. He had already prepared a fire bundle by the time Cortana arrived breathing heavily, the majority of the deer skins she herself wore wrapped tightly around her middle. She had once bemoaned the fact that she had gone from living in a space faring society to being little more than a wondering nomad. Given the current situation, this observation was more true now than it ever was. From the midst of her thick layer of deer skins Cortana produced a small flint rock and handed it to Jake. It took the boy three strikes with John's combat knife for the fire to ignite, but when it did the warmth spread over what was left of the ka-tet as if it came from the deepest pits of Dante's Inferno. Cortana reached her hands out again and both the UNSC pistol and the

long gun were placed in them. Her hands stung as they touched the freezing steel and she moved quickly to shove them closer to her body where they could be kept warm, preventing the gun oil from freezing.

As Roland began to pull the skin on the deer back he eyed her. "You should not be out here."

Cortana gave her best attempt at a huff, the shivering she endured making it lose much of its intended effect. She had experienced a similar sensation to cold before, the icy years of loneliness on the wreckage of the Forward Unto Dawn having chilled her processors down to their core, and Cortana could not say that she enjoyed actual cold any better. "If I spent any more time cooped up in the shelter I'd go insane. Besides, good mental health of the mother is just as important as physical health for the development of the baby."

Roland shook his head. He could not deny that Cortana was the most intelligent person he ever met, but sometimes the things she said simply made no sense to him. He made quick work of the carcass, cutting meat from bone which was then placed in the snow. They would haul as much as they could back to the shelter, and whatever they did not eat tonight would be covered in snow where it could stay fresh for weeks on end. The food from a fresh kill never did last that long before it was eaten, but it was still a good way to preserve the meat. It had been the gunslinger who had ordered the ka-tet to stop once the truly heavy snowfall had set in, Cortana being in no condition to travel while the world was in the deep clutches of winter. He still felt the pull of the Tower on him, and each morning he had to resist the urge to continue his journey towards it. It was seeing Cortana's sleeping body next to Jake that strengthened his resolve to stay until the spring thaw came.

For Cortana's part stopping had been a relief for physically she felt as if she could no longer go any further. Yet as the weeks wore on a constant thought went through her mind. _You said you would be here John. _Her hands rubbed her stomach, the place she endeavored to keep warm above all others. _You always keep your promises. Please don't start by breaking this one. _She had just turned to speak with Jake when Cortana's electric blue eyes glazed over and she began to stare off into the distance without ever blinking.

Jake looked at her and felt a flash of concern, but little surprise. "She's doing it again." Roland nodded but said nothing. Jake felt a certain amount of frustration towards the gunslinger. There was no doubt about the concern Roland had for both him and Cortana, but his distancing himself emotionally from them had continued to get worse. It was more of a feeling than any actual actions on Roland's part, but it was still very evident and Jake had already guessed as to the reason why he was doing it. The gunslinger was preparing himself for what needed to be done. "Do you know what it is?"

"Todash," Roland said.

Jake waited in vain for an explanation. When there was none he pressed further. "If she has gone todash then why is her body still here?"

"Todash of a kind," Roland clarified, his full attention still on the

kill. "Perhaps she is only seeing another world and so her body remains here."

"But you don't know for sure," Jake said, and Roland nodded. Jake took a long look at Cortana who was still in her trance like state. "I think it's time we talked to her about it."

The gunslinger turned his head towards his adopted son. There was no doubt in his mind that the boy loved Cortana, and would be willing to do anything for her. In Roland's mind this was both a good and a bad thing. He had never forgiven himself for the part he played in ending Jake's childhood, and Roland had a feeling that once Cortana's son was born the final nail would be put onto the coffin of what had Jake's boyhood.

The cooling insides of the deer brought the gunslinger back to the present, and he nodded his agreement towards Jake. "We will."

â€|

Compared to the outside world, the small lean-to shelter which had just enough space for the ka-tet to sleep lying down and a fire pit which burned in the middle and released smoke into the makeshift chimney overhead was a veritable sauna.

Cortana bit her lip as she ended her story, adding one last small detail which suddenly seemed to be the most important piece of information. "It's not like the dreams I have. I'm actually there. I can feel what he feels, see what he sees. Every emotion and thought he has I have to." She shook her head, "I know what I'm seeing is suppose to tell me something, but I'm not sure what it is yet."

"What did you see this time?" Roland asked, the trial of smoke blurring out his face to Cortana.

"He had a song stuck in his head," Cortana said. Within the space of half a second she ran the entire song through her head, analyzing every note, line and word. "Its old. I'm surprised he even knows it. I know what it's supposed to be about, but I thinkâ€|" Again she ran the lyrics through her head, "I think it's about us. About the ka-tet."

"Will you sing it?" the gunslinger asked. Cortana stared at him, made to make a protest but quickly reconsidered it. The last time she actually sang was during the first night at the Calla, an event that now seemed to have occurred eons ago, and then she had sung in front of a group of hundreds of people. She supposed that singing now in front of two people she deeply cared about would be a cake walk in comparison.

She sang, her voice hypnotic and soothing, beginning softly at the beginning of each verse, rising to a near crescendo towards its end, before falling again to a mere whisper when she reached the refrain. She sang it almost as if it were a lullaby despite the heartache and loss it spoke of. Cortana sang.

_My name is Mark Fenner and I am a Yorkshire man, _

I earn my living by my pen, tell a sterling tale I can,
But the one I tell you now boys was writ by foolish men,
_When the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom
again_
_Come all ye young unmarried men, you boys of the bulldog
breed,_
_We are looking for the strong and brave, it's what Britannia
needs,_
_And we'll fight the Hun in Flanders, and the Germans on the
Seine,_
But the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again
We first set out to Egypt where the heat was hard to bare,
_We were waiting for the call to France for the Boche were fighting
there,_
And we talked of what we do boys, brothers, sons and friends,
But the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again
At last we heard the Push was on and we sailed across the Med,
We little thought in two weeks time we'd most of us be dead,
_And the girls at home would weep with a grief that's hard to
mend_
_When the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom
again_
_With shouts of joy we lead the charge towards the German
wire,_
_Our handsome mason was the first to fall when the guns they opened
fire,_
His face no longer handsome, on the barbs he met his end,
And the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again
We had a Sergeant Major, bold by nature Bold by name,
_But the German guns don't pick and choose and Bold died just the
same,_
_And the other gallants followed, their coins of life to
spend,_
And the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again
We did not want to lose you, but we thought you ought to go,
Our king and country needed you, Lord Kitchener told us so,

_But the story I have told you was writ by foolish men, _

_When the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again _

_And the petals fell from a Rose of York never to bloom again _

When Cortana finished she was met with silence, but unlike in the Calla this silence did not eventually descend into thunderous applause. Still she caught Jake having to close his mouth which had been hanging slightly opened, and she turned her head away from Roland because of the way he was looking at her. "The Rose of York," Cortana said, her voice weary, emotionally drained after singing the song. "It is about the Battle of the Somme where 19,240 British men died in the first day of fighting. The song itself though was inspired by the book 'Covenant with Death' by John Harris." She sighed deeply, her eyes staring into the fire, "Just another one of those coincidences that are not really coincidences. And here is another one for you. The sigil of the house of York is the white rose. Same as the sigil for the Tet Corporation."

"Rose of York, Rose of New York," Jake said.

"Exactly," Cortana said. She watched as the wood crackled in the flames, burning a bright reddish orange before turning into hot coals. "The first verse is easy enough to figure out, being about the writer. The second, 'Come all ye young unmarried men', I think is talking about the gunslingers and Spartans. Strong and brave, and so young when you first started fighting." She could not help but sneak a glance at Jake when she said this. The third verse, 'heat was hard to bare' is about the way station and the desert. Most of our stories in mid-world started there, even Roland's to a certain extent. "Brothers, sons and friends', well we were all family to a certain extent. The fourthâ€¦" Cortana stopped herself short. Roland and Jake could figure this part out for themselves. For her it was just too painful. In another world perhaps only two weeks had passed, but there was no denying that now most of the ka-tet was dead, and even though she held on to the conviction that she would see John again the grief she had experienced over his death still festered like a cancer in her heart. Cortana cleared her throat loudly, "The fifth verse I think is about John."

"He wasn't the first to die though," Jake said.

"No," Cortana agreed. "And no matter what happened to his face, he was still handsome to me, but I still think it is about him. "The sixth, well that could be talking about a lot of people, Johnson is the first that comes to mind for me, but really I think it is about Eddie. His twim was Gunnery Sergeant Buck after all, and he was bold in his own way. The seventh, 'We did not want to lose you, but we thought you ought to go'."

"The readers," Jake offered. "Or maybe the writer again."

"No," Roland said. "The White."

Cortana nodded her agreement. "King and country' obviously refers to you Roland, and 'writ by foolish men.'" She gave an insincere smile, "Searching for The Dark Tower was always a fool's quest wasn't it?" To this Roland gave no reply.

They were quiet after that, none of them daring to speak, the silence oddly comforting as if they had moved passed the need to talk with one another in order to communicate what each person was feeling. It was also without any words that the three laid down to sleep, Cortana resting her head very uncomfortably on a pillow of deer skins with her sore back stretched out on a mattress of pine needles. Sleep did not come easily, but come it did, and Cortana did not dream. As they slept the winter wind outside began to pick up, and the chimes began to sound.

When Cortana woke up next, she would see John again.

85. Chapter 85 The Warrior and the Intellect

Chapter 85: The Warrior and the Intellect

(Space/Time Anomaly) The Scarlet Fields of None, End-World

She stood there in bare feet, just as she always did when she came to this place. Her gaze when she woke up, if it could be considered waking up, was fixed on one of the innumerable roses that grew agelessly in the fields surrounding the lynchpin of all existence. The flower which radiated an unimaginable beauty was now closed, the yellow sun contained within emanating the same wordless tune that she had heard when Cortana first encountered the Rose in the vacant lot in the New York of 1977. Her skin which in the first year of actual life had gone through more changes than she had thought possible, was now once again an alabaster white as a result from not seeing the sun in nearly seven months. The fragrance of the wild flowers was nearly overpowering in its complexity, and with it came the faces of every person she had ever met, friend or foe, all joined together singing a unified song of peace. A song of ultimate triumph over the forces of the Red. She saw them all in one instant, heard the joy of her long dead friends at seeing her again, and the sorrow of those who had committed egregious evils against her and those she cared about. All were there except one.

Feeling his presence she almost dared not look, but her head moved of its own accord. In the distance was The Dark Tower with its two remaining Beams moving sluggishly towards it, weak and ready to break asunder at any moment. This time though she paid no attention to the wonders of eternity that lay before her. Cortana's eyes only saw him.

He stood there with the same posture she knew him best for, as if he were waiting for an officer to appear at any moment, his clothes the same he had worn before he put the MJOLNIR on for the last time. Faded blue jeans and the black shirt that was turned inside out in order to conceal the smiley face. His own face held the smile that had been burned into her memory like an open scar. The one true smile he had ever given since she had picked him all those years ago. That crooked grin which made him look so much younger, and if Cortana had not thought her eyes were deceiving her she would have said that he did look younger. There was no longer any grey in his hair which had returned fully to its natural dark brown, his face devoid of the wrinkles and stress lines she had become so accustomed to seeing that Cortana hardly even noticed them, his skin devoid of the numerous scars he had received in the decades of warfare he had participated

in.

Cortana's heart did not know if it should start beating faster or stop all together, and seemed to be trying to do both. Eagerly she raised a foot in the air, the first maneuver in the first step she would take towards John that would have inevitably turned into a full sprint, or as close to a sprint that a pregnant woman can come to, when doubt clouded her thinking. Cortana had dreamed of John before, had even had this specific dream before she met him at the Tower, and always he had disappeared after she had taken her first step. Slowly she placed her foot back on the ground, the roses parting in order to grant her access to the rich soil.

"Is this real?" she asked, more to herself than to him. A part of her believed that if she attempted to talk to him now when he was so close to her then she would wake up as punishment for daring to question the dream.

John turned his head towards the setting sun which burned in the sky and casted the passing clouds in hues of pink and orange. "Does it feel real?"

Cortana looked at the sun, closing her eyes just as she had done onboard the Infinity as it hovered in the artificial skies of Requiem. She could feel the heat washing over her pale skin, sensed each tiny imperfection in the ultraviolet rays that bombarded her body, and the coolness of a passing cloud blocking the sun's rays. Opening her eyes she saw John's shadow looming over her, having not even noticed that he had moved towards her. He was close now, his light blue eyes wrapping themselves around hers in their intensity. As she tentatively reached a hand upwards towards his cheek it was like touching him for the first time all over again. Her breathing was uneven, her outstretched hand shook, and Cortana nearly pulled it back in surprise as the skin gave slightly to her touch. When she spoke her voice shook, "John?"

I am not sure who initiated the embrace first, but in an instant they were both in each other's arms. Cortana wrapped her arms around John's waist the best she could given her swollen stomach, the Master Chief's arms going across her shoulders and into the small of her back. Her head was beneath his and he rested his own on top of it. She could feel him breathing gently against her, could hear the beating of his heart as it pumped warm living blood through his veins, and most of all the one thing that had been missing in all of the dreams she had of him she could smell the scent that was uniquely his.

"I knew it," Cortana said as she rubbed her face into his chest, attempting to take as much of him in as possible. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew it." She could not help but repeat the words, her inner circuitry all but useless as it struggled to compose a single coherent thought.

A rumbling issued from her Spartan's chest, indicating that he was laughing in his own way. "So you did miss me."

Cortana huffed at him, and pulled away just enough so that she could stare once again into those eyes she had craved to see. "You couldn't think of anything original to say?"

"Being original was always your job," John said. The smile was still there, and Cortana could not say it was not having an effect on her, months of hormonal induced sexual frustration now finally having an outlet. If he had not been a Spartan John's neck would have surely been broken by the force Cortana used to pull his head downwards as she pressed his lips against hers. The kiss was passionate and desperate, John returning it with the best of his ability before giving up and letting her mouth take over. It was only after her lungs screamed for air that she pulled away, and immediately Cortana felt blood and heat rise to her cheeks.

"Sorry," she muttered. She would have looked away if it was not for the desperate need for her eyes to cling to the features of his face. "There are some needs you haven't been filling. I'm even starting to find Roland attractive." John gave an amused grunt and pulled her back into him, and Cortana's body melted into his. "I knew it," she said once again. "I always knew you were here. I never stopped believing. I never doubted, not for one secondâ€¦"

"We're all here," John said, and at these words Cortana turned her head up to look at him. "All of us."

At first she refused to acknowledge the implication of his words, resisted the inevitable conclusion her unnaturally intelligent mind drew as best she could. She fought valiantly against the undeniable truth, matched her strength again that of ka's. Ka was stronger, and the realization of what this place really was, of what the White was giving her, hit her in the place she was most vulnerable. The center of her chest.

This was CAN-KA NO REY.

This was the place that existed at the very end of mid-world.

This was the place that stood at the very edge of existence.

This was a place that existed both in the physical and the metaphysical.

This was the clearing at the end of the path.

This was The Dark Tower.

"How long?" Cortana asked, wishing that the answer would never come.

"Sunset," John said. If it were possible his voice sounded as remorseful as hers.

She buried her head into his chest again, eyes looking at the setting sun on the horizon which was now almost touching the hills beyond where they stood. Her arms wrapped themselves even tighter around him, fingers digging into his shirt, desperately hoping that if she just held onto him and never ever let him go then maybe he would not have to leave. By the way John held her in return he felt much the same way.

A wave of pure malevolence and hatred cascaded towards them, Cortana sensing the emotion as you would perceive it on a person's face, and she also felt it bounce harmlessly away from them as if they were

protected by an invisible shield. Her eyes moved to where the assault had come from, the pylon now receiving almost her full attention. There near the base of the Tower perched atop of a balcony glowed a light of pure pulsating red.

"That's him isn't it?" Cortana asked.

John looked behind him at Tower balcony. "Yes," he said. "The Crimson King attempted to enter the Tower and rise to the godhead, but he became trapped."

"Why couldn't he reach the godhead?" Cortana asked

"Because," John said. "It is already occupied." As he stared at the Red king's perch on the Tower the crimson light began to fade until it was little more than a soft glow. John nodded his head, almost like a teacher who had just finished lecturing a misbehaved child. "Roland will defeat him."

"He always does," Cortana said quietly, causing John to return his full attention to her. Now she really could not look at him and her eyes hung low towards the roses growing beneath them. "I can't love him the same way I love you."

John put a hand under her chin and lifted her head up so that she would look at him, "No one is asking you to. Not even him."

Cortana shook her head, "He needs it though. Needs someone to love him that way, and there is no one that can give it to him." At this John was quiet, and he moved his hand from below her chin to around her shoulder. Cortana surrendered to the silence, because for her there was no such thing when she was with him. Every breath, every heart beat, every movement and rustling of clothes or even bare skin against each other, every touch and unspoken emotion was enough noise to fill an amphitheater. To make this singular moment perfect there was but one thing that was missing.

Their son announced his presence with a swift kick into his mother's side, and it would not have surprised Cortana to know that he had been able to sense the presence of both his parents. With her fingers around John's wrist she place his hand onto her stomach, "Can you feel him?"

John nodded, "He's strong."

"He's like his father," Cortana said, leaning her head and back fully into him and shifting her body enough to give him greater access to her stomach. "I'm going to name him after you."

"You are going to name him John 117?" There was humor in his voice, humor that only she and a very small handful of others would have been able to detect.

"No," Cortana said in a do not be dense on purpose voice. "I'm going to use your real last name." She looked up at him and smiled, "My last name."

John returned the smile, "I'd like that."

"Thought you would," Cortana said. She closed her eyes, content that

for the first time since her creation that everything was right in existence. That everything was where it should be.

"I love you." Cortana's bliss was broken by his declaration and her eyes flew open. His overly large hand rubbed against her stomach, "I love both of you."

In the center of Cortana's emotions there was a dial, a dial that she no longer had any control over in these late stages of pregnancy. It would turn as it saw fit, not unlike the fits of rampancy she had endured, but unlike having to deal with the multitude of fractured personalities weaving themselves in and out of her system, every time this dial turned her emotions from one extreme to another it was still her. To say that she was riding an emotional rollercoaster would be inaccurate, for the dips and turns of a ride can be predicted and prepared for. Her emotions were like a ship caught in the worst of storms, rocking uncontrollably as its hull was beaten by the wind and the waves, but especially the wind. With John's words Cortana's dial flipped.

"You love me," she said pushing herself out of his arms and turned to look at him, John letting his outstretched arms fall to his side. "You tell me that you can never come back and then you say you love me?" She felt her hands clench into fists, heat and electricity flowing up her body. Somewhere buried under the cascading emotions was a voice of reason telling her to calm down. She either ignored it or was unable to hear it as she spoke her next words. "You always leave me!" She had not meant to shout, saw the pained look in John's eyes, but by now it was far too late.

"You leave me and I'm the one that has to wait for you to come back. I had to wait for you on Halo, I had to wait for you on High Charity, I had to wait on the Forward Unto Dawn for five years while you slept and I was dying." She shook her head violently, "And here's the kicker, I died and got a body. Was able to do everything with you that I had always dreamed of doing. Everything that I never even dared to dream of." She was dimly aware of the warm tears trickling down her cheeks, but even as she cried she laughed at the same time, "And then you died. I sacrificed my life for you and you died not once but twice. Just when I became pregnant, just when I needed you most you left me again." John was looking away from her, and it seemed at least for now he was at a loss for what to do. "And now," Cortana continued. Her voice was beginning to shake, threatening to devolve into an incoherent jumble of words. "After you couldn't say it when you were alive, couldn't even say it when you were dying. Now when you know you can't come back you tell me!" She swallowed, her throat threatening to close off as her emotional ship was about to capsize. "You tell me that you love me!"

Her internal dial flipped again, and Cortana's body was plagued by uncontrollable sobs that caused her to shake. John was on her in an instant, putting his arms back around her. Again she pushed away from him, a curled fist colliding with his chest, doing more harm to her than to him. He stood there silently as she continued to bang her fist against him, her aim wild and her arm lacking any strength. With one last halfhearted swing she succumbed fully to her grief, the tears rolling down her face, the mind no longer having even a semblance of control over her body which hung limply in John's arms. After several moments she put her arms around his waist and willingly soaked the front of his shirt.

"I'm sorry," John whispered just enough so that she could hear it. He repeated those words, repeated them as many times as Cortana needed to hear them.

It could have been minutes or days as far as Cortana was concerned, but at last the crying subsided just enough so that she could speak again. "Walter was right, we were never meant to be together. Even before you died we spent more time apart then we ever did with each other."

"I don't regret it," John said. "Any of it."

Eddie's last words to Roland, and to Cortana's surprise she actually smiled at the thought of him. John, like Eddie, always seemed to know just what to say to make her smile. "How is Eddie?"

John seemed to make a show of looking at the endless fields of roses that surrounded them, "He said this place needed a bar."

At this Cortana managed to chuckle, "He would say that." Gently she placed a hand on his chest in the place that she had punched him and began to rub it softly. "I can't do this without you."

"Yes you can," John said. Cortana opened her mouth to protest, but John cut her off. "You are stronger than me, you always have been. It was you that kept the Index away from the Gravemind, you that defeated the Didact, and you that defeated the dark man. Everything that we accomplished together was because of you."

"No," Cortana said. "You don't understand. I did those things for you."

"I know," John said as he placed his hand back on her stomach. "And now you will do it for him."

"But I can't keep him safe by myself," Cortana protested.

"The writer will help," John said simply.

Cortana looked at him with a dumbfounded expression, "The writer can't help us. He said so himself."

John shook his head, "The White is allowing him to directly intervene, but he can only do it once, and he is going to do it soon."

"Only once?" Cortana asked, and John nodded. "What is he going to do?"

"Whatever he chooses."

"Then he will bring you back," Cortana said desperately. "He has to bring you back to me."

"He can," John said. "But he won't. Keeping you safe is more important than bringing me back."

"It's the same thing," Cortana said. There had never been any distinction in her mind. She had always felt safer when John was

around, and for him to suggest anything different was insane.

"No its not," John said. His head hung slightly, but his eyes still maintained contact with hers. "I was built to destroy, not create."

"You created something," Cortana said, placing her own hand on top of his as it rested on her stomach.

"One thing," John said, the corners of his mouth moving upwards. In the distance a trumpet sounded, the noise rolling across the blood red fields and filling Cortana with an inevitable dread. John turned his head towards the sound, eyes moving to the top of the Tower in the distance. He closed his eyes briefly before returning them back to hers. "I have to go."

Cortana clung to him tighter, eyes filled with one last desperate hope, "Will I ever see you again."

"Yes," John said, and his hand gently rubbed her stomach. "But hopefully not anytime soon."

Cortana leaned forward and this time the kiss was slow and deliberate, her fingers running through his brown hair. It would have likely lasted forever if John and Cortana had their way, but an invisible pair of hands moved in between them and pushed them away from each other. On the horizon only the very top of the orange sun was visible above the crest of the hills, long shadows descending upon the Warrior and the Intellect as they reluctantly moved away from each other. As the last of the light faded the roses blossomed, the suns of a million worlds swirling around them, and in the brilliance of their light Cortana and John's hands were locked with one another. The firm grip the two of them held weakened, until they were holding on to one another by nothing more than their finger tips, until that too slipped away.

86. Chapter 86: Pillars of the Earth

Chapter 86: Pillars of the Earth

(Space/Time Anomaly) White Lands of Empathica, Mid-World

For once Cortana got up before Roland, the gunslinger sleeping soundly by the fire with his one good hand curled around the handle of his blue steeled revolver. She had expected both him and Jake to wake up as she left the shelter, but for once ka seemed to be with her. It was early dawn, the grey sky of winter blocking out the sun much as the poisonous clouds of Thunderclap had done, snowflakes drifting lazily towards the ground and adding to the already thick sheet of snow. She trudged through the drifts, taking no note of where she was going or in which direction she was headed, arms wrapped protectively around her middle as if to protect her womb from the demons of winter that threatened to snatch her son away.

After perhaps an hour, although who can tell for sure how much time had passed in a place like this, she fell on her knees and the snow came up to her waist to cover her in a blanket of frost. Cortana was not sure what to do at this point, her physically exhausted body slowing down her thinking nearly to that of a normal human being. The

White had always spoken first, no matter which member of the ka-tet it was addressing. John was the one that had the longest conversation with the White by far, and even he had not been able to change its mind. But maybe, just maybe, Cortana could.

"I've never asked you for anything," Cortana said. She felt foolish kneeling in the snow talking to no one, but she was desperate enough now to give it a try. "We have done everything you've ever asked of us, even if we didn't understand it. Even if we still don't understand it, and right now I'm only asking for one thing." Snowflakes had begun to accumulate themselves on her hair, her body begging for warmth. She did not shiver, did nothing to keep the cold off of herself, did not even bother to wipe the snow from her hair. "I'm not even going to ask for me and John to be together again, just that he gets to know his son. That my son gets to know his father." Cortana shook her head, snow falling to the ground off of her deep black hair as she did, "If my son is what I think he is than I'm not the best one to raise him. He needs a father, someone who can help him learn how to control his strength. Someone who can teach him when it is best not to use his abilities. Someone who can teach him never to give up, never to stop fighting. John can do that, he has always done that." She listened in vain for a reply, but there was nothing. Nothing except for the creaking of pine branches over head, and the bubbling of a nearby brook. "If it means taking John's place I'll do it. I'll agree to anything you tell me just please, bring him back for my son." She paused again, but still there was no reply. Cortana closed her eyes, wondering what on heaven and earth ever made her think this could possibly work. "You never listen do you? You were always just the lesser of two evils."

She was about to stand up, had her frozen hand buried in the snow in preparation for propping her heavily burdened body out of the drift when the wind began to blow. It blew gently, lifting the few stray strands of hair out of Cortana's face, and from out of the whirlwind the voice of the White spoke.

(Cortana)

Her name was spoken with a sigh, and while it held the same firmness and comfort it always had underneath it all Cortana could detect remorse, and if she dared to believe it, shame.

(You give so much and ask for so little in return.)

"Then give me this," Cortana said pleadingly. "It's the only thing I'm asking for. If me and John are not meant to be together fine, but don't deny my son a chance to know his father."

(Your son will have a father, but it will not be John.)

Cortana's fists clenched, directing her anger at the sky above her, "It can't be anyone else! We do everything you want and you give us nothing! Why, why can't you give me this one thing? Why can't you bring John back like you did before? Can you at least tell me why it can't be John? Why somebody else should help me raise my son instead of him?" Cortana began to pant, waiting for an answer that did not come. She slammed her fists into the snow where they became buried almost up to her elbows, "Just tell me why!"

The gentle wind grew in its ferocity, blowing with the force of a

hurricane against her exposed face. The voice of the White, which had always been gentle and kind to her, now waxed with an anger of its own.

(Were you there?)

With the driving wind and cold it was impossible for Cortana to think, and for the first time in her short life there was not a single thought in her mind, no ability to comprehend the meaning behind the question.

(Were you there when I created all of existence, when I arose from the void and formed everything out of nothing? Were you there when I erected The Dark Tower and set its foundations on the rocks of space and time? Were you there as I watched eternity take shape, when I watched your galaxy blossom and grow? When I brought order to chaos, when I sowed the seeds of life in all of the infinite number of worlds, when I set the pillars of size itself? Answer me, oh great Intellect, and tell me if you were.)

Cortana did not answer, her hair blowing in the wind, her eyes little more than slits as she stared headlong into the oncoming gale. Yet deep within her, the foundries of her heart began to forge the beginnings of rage.

(It was I who created you; I who created John; I who created Roland, Jake, Susannah, Eddie, and Callahan)

Then, if it were possible, Cortana could almost feel a finger pointed straight at her.

(And even before your son was a single thought inside your mind, he was fully formed in mine.)

At this Cortana could barely contain her own anger any longer and bit her lip in an attempt to keep it in.

(Were you there?)

"No I wasn't!" Cortana said bitterly, shouting above the storm. "But that still does not make you right."

In an instant the wind died, Cortana's dark hair falling back around her shoulders. Now when the White spoke Cortana had no doubt that she heard both shame and remorse. It seemed to consider her words, weighing them in each hand before it came back with its reply.

(Raise your son to be the person we need him to be, and after he is called upon you and John will be together again, and your son will know his true father. This is my promise to you.)

"But John will not raise him," Cortana said, and the whispers of the wind was the only reply she needed. She had done everything she could, had journeyed almost to the very precipice of infinity, had defied demons and the soldiers of the Red, and in one last desperate gamble had taken her appeal to the highest authority there was, and the White had promptly rejected her plea. There would be no explanation, no reason behind its motivations given. Right or wrong the White did what it willed, and Cortana was utterly powerless to

change its mind.

"Who then?" Cortana asked, her voice now small and defeated. "Who will be his father until John comes back?"

(You already know)

"Cortana!" Jake's voice broke through the trees, traveling over the snow covered forest like a sled and into her ears. She looked up and saw the boy running to her, his natural agility hampered by the frozen precipitation blanketing the ground. He came to her out of breath, a look of relief on his face. "Where were you? Roland and I have been looking for you for hours."

"I needed to think," Cortana said, the weight of the cold now fully hitting her. She attempted to stand but her knees hit the frozen ground, her joints stiff and muscles cramped. Jake threw one of her arms over his shoulder and lifted her up, taking care to prevent her from falling over and landing on her stomach.

"You are not suppose to be alone," Jake said. His voice was not that of accusation, but of pure worry and fear. "You are never suppose to be alone."

"I know," Cortana said numbly, doing her best to move her feet as Jake guided her back to the shelter. She looked down at the twelve year old boy. In many ways he was an adult before his time, but she had seen the few vestiges of childhood left within him. What she feared the most was that these too would soon be gone. "You are so young," Cortana said, her voice hoarse and weakened from the shouting match she had just come from. She shook her head, "I never wanted this for you."

Jake looked at her with his sky blue eyes, "What we wanted never had anything to do with it."

Cortana sighed at his words. She attempted to shift more weight on her own two feet, but Jake remained firm and it was he who led her back to the warmth of the shelter and to safety.

87. Chapter 87 Dandelo

Chapter 87: Dandelo

The spring thaw had come, bringing with it the murky dark brown mud that sticks to boots like cement and drags you even further down into the muck and filth. It was through this impassible ground that the last of the ka-tet traveled through, walls of mud climbing up past their knees as they trudged their way through, barely making a handful of kilometers a day with Cortana requiring frequent rests. She felt now as if she could give birth any day, this pregnancy either being the longest or shortest that had ever been. Which it is no one can really say, not even Cortana who had long ago given up counting the passing weeks and now could no longer remember exactly how many months had passed since she first conceived. What she did know, this knowledge coming from pure instinct, was that she was close. Very close.

In the days following her meeting with John and her conversation with

the White, Cortana had refused to leave the shelter, had done little more than occasionally rise from where she slept, her conversation with the others reduced to only the bare necessities. Her mind worked, replaying both conversations in her head over and over again. Trying desperately to come up with any reason why John was not the best candidate to raise her son. The conclusions she came to racked her heart with guilt and shame.

Cortana had never consulted John about getting pregnant, had known when they first had sex that she was at the point in her cycle when pregnancy was most likely. By the time she had even mentioned the possibility it was far too late, and John had expressed doubts about his own abilities as a father. She had dismissed these fears as little more than natural self doubt, never considering that there might be something to what he had said, or that he had held on to these insecurities even in death. Whatever the White's reasons for deciding that John would not be a good father, Cortana was sure that she would never agree with them, and more importantly that her disagreement mattered little. At last after exhausting every single stage of grief, worrying Roland and Jake to death in the process, Cortana entered a stage she had thought she would never come to, had refused to come to.

Acceptance.

Accepting that he would not be coming back, that she would have to find a way to live her life without him, and now Cortana knew what John had been trying to tell her in The Scarlet Fields of None, for had she not tried to do the same thing after she herself had died?

The world had moved on, had moved past needing Master Chief Petty Officer John 117, and he wanted Cortana to move on as well. To move on not just for her sake, but for the sake of their son as well. There was one thing and one thing alone that made this realization easier to bare, that the White and more importantly that John had promised that they would be together again. Love, true love, is patient beyond measure and Cortana was willing to wait an entire lifetime if it meant being with him in the end. She would live her life the best she could for the sake of her son, would stay alive as long as he needed her, and then she would see John in the shadow of the Tower standing in the endless blood red fields.

At this moment, however, Cortana was focusing on a different mission, one that she had to finish before her son was born.

"Tell me more of this Linda," Roland said as he walked beside Cortana, one eye on the path ahead and the other on her in case she fell or became weary with fatigue.

"She was arguably the best sniper to have ever lived," Cortana replied, her own focus divided as well between Roland and the path ahead of her. "She could pick off targets so rapidly that not even John could be sure which she had hit first, could pick off Banshee pilots by aiming for the small opening in the canopy. Her skills were more of an art form than anything else, and it never seemed to matter what the conditions were, she could always hit her target." As she spoke she studied Roland's face, the familiar expression of pain laced memories gliding over his eyes. "You knew someone like that didn't you?"

"Aye. Aileen Ritter," Roland said. "She was the best. The best I have ever seen." There was an almost undetectable movement in the gunslinger's eyes, flicking to the ground for less than a fraction of a second before returning to their original position. "It was unheard of for a woman to become a gunslinger in those days, but Cort trained her in secret and separately from the rest of us. She was the only one other than me that survived Jericho Hill." His eyes flicked downward again, and if Cortana had blinked she would have missed it. "She died that night as I was carrying her back to Gilead. I carried her body the rest of the way and buried her in the city's ruins."

"You cared about her," Cortana said. Other than Susannah, Susan, and herself Cortana had never seen Roland this emotional over a woman.

"I did, but not in the same way she cared about me," the gunslinger replied. A pensive look came across his face, as if he was contemplating if he should say the words that were on his mind. Seeming to come to a decision he said, "It was an arranged marriage. Aileen was selected for me at the coming of age ceremony in Gilead. As was the custom."

He grew quiet again, and Cortana was in the middle of arguing with herself if she should leave the gunslinger be or ask him to continue when suddenly he stopped, Jake who was only a few steps behind the pair moving to stand beside them. They stood at the top of a short but steep hill, the forest breaking before them into a wide open grassy plain. Ahead of where they stood were two roads meeting at an intersection, the old pavement showing obvious signs of regular upkeep. At the cross roads were two signs which read

****ODD'S LANE****

****TOWER ROAD****

Tower Road stretched over the plain, obediently following the path of the Beam overhead, winding like a black snake into End-World where the nexus of time, space, and size stood. The second road, Odd's Lane, was little more than a long drive way, meandering sluggishly towards a house no more than a few hundred meters away from the ka-tet. The house looked like something straight out of a fairy tale, its quaint cottage like appearance giving the sense of comfort and safety, thick grey smoke bellowing out of the red brick chimney.

"People," Jake said apprehensively. "What do we do?"

"We can't just leave them," Cortana said. "Not with Mordred following behind us."

Roland nodded his silent agreement and began to walk down the hill without ceremony. Jake held out his hand to Cortana and she took it, allowing the boy to guide her down the steep slope. They approached the house, their hands drifting to their guns without their minds perceiving the movement, prepared for any possible creature or demon that may be tricking their eyes with glammer. Before they could reach the front door the loud high pitched neighing of a horse struck their ears, causing the three of them to halt their approach, hands inching

even further towards their guns. The door to the house flung open, and out of it limped an old man. He was using a cane, his bad left leg causing him to walk with a sideways gate. His face was kind, that of a man you would not think twice about leaving alone with your children even if you hardly knew him.

The old man turned his head over his shoulder and shouted, "Quit your gripping Lippy. I may only have one good eye but I can still see." He turned back towards them and waved his cane in a pseudo salute, "Hile gunslingers! Gunslingers say true, on pilgrimage to The Dark Tower. I can tell that's what you are by the hard calibers you're wearing."

"Hile," Roland replied, returning the salute. "What is your name?"

"Joe Collins of San Francisco, 1981," he said. He smiled, and although his teeth betrayed his age it was still charming. He saw Jake's questioning look and said, "Yes I am from the America side, although not from the keystone America I'm sorry to say. My tale is full of sorrow and woe and would likely bore you to death were I to tell it. To cut to the chase it ended with me getting hit by a Greyhound bus. Last thing I remember was receiving my last rites from a priest." He laughed, his chuckle as merry as church bells. "I'm not even Catholic, and between you and me I think the man was drunk as a skunk at the time."

Callahan, Cortana thought, and by the looks on the faces of both Roland and Jake she could tell they were thinking the same thing. The odds were astronomical at best, but then again ka was always working. Still the idea set Cortana with a certain amount of unease, although she was not quite sure as to why.

"And what be your name gunslinger?" Joe Collins asked.

"Roland Deschain of Gilead, son of Steven."

"Gilead," Joe Collins exclaimed, his face a study in exaggerated surprise. "Gilead say true?"

"You know of it?" Roland asked skeptically.

"Yes even here at the end of the world I have heard of Gilead and the Legends of King Arthur," Joe Collins said. Cortana expected him to elaborate further but instead he turned to Jake, smiling sweetly. "And what is your name young lad?"

"John Chambers of New York, son of Roland," Jake said. Roland glanced over at him but said nothing, allowing the boy to explain himself.

Joe Collins looked between Jake and Roland, "Now I can see the family resemblance but why are the last names different?"

"I'm adopted," Jake said. His tone held a measure of finality to it and Joe Collins did not press further.

Nodding he turned to Cortana who answered him before he could ask his question, "Cortana of Reach, daughter of none."

At this Joe Collins eyes grew wide, his pupils nearly taking up most of his eyes, "A daughter of none?" He looked at him up and down, his eyes landing on her face, "Yes I can see. You are far more beautiful than any normal woman can be." He brought a hand up to his chin and began to rub it, "Daughter of none. A product of the Prim, and with a body no less."

"In a way," Cortana said. "But my story is even longer than yours."

"I have no doubt," Joe Collins said, hand still on his chin and his eyes drifting to her swollen stomach. "May I ask when you are due?"

"Any day," Cortana said.

Joe Collins nodded, his voice becoming resolute and firm as he swung around and pointed his cane at his house, "You shall stay here then till the child comes. I'm no doctor but I have plenty of hot water, and if T.V. has taught me anything hot water is all you need." He left no room for argument, and Cortana was surprised that no one, herself included, bothered to question the speed at which Joe Collins agreed to help them.

_Ka, _Cortana thought. _It has to be ka. _Then something she thought she would never say crossed her mind, _please let it be ka._

â€|

The inside of Joe Collins house was as small as its outward appearance suggested, the rolling warmth of the fire place and the softness of the couch Cortana now sat on giving her a level of comfort she had not felt for ages. The walls of the living room were mostly devoid of ornaments, and few wood carvings displayed on the mantel above the fire place, and a pinewood coffee table with a thick finish situated in front of the couch with a deep blue rug underneath which covered up much of the wood floors. There was one small picture hanging on the wall, and although the image was grainy and unfocused, what it was of had caused all three of them to take notice, the gunslinger most of all.

"Yep that's the Tower sure as shootin," the old man said as he stood behind Roland, the gunslinger putting forth all his effort not to allow his mouth to hang open as he looked at the photograph.

"How close have you been to it?" Roland asked. "Have you walked through the field of roses? Touched it with your own hand?" There was a sense of desperateness in his voice, the picture tearing down the wall that hid his emotions.

Joe Collins shook his head, "No that was about as far as I dared to go. I was afraid it would kill me if were to have gone near it." He turned around to look at Cortana and Jake, "It's the song you see. The song that comes out of the roses. Once you step into the fields it sucks you in like a vacuum, and there are very few minds that can resist its call." Cortana could understand that very well, for even now the Tower still called to her, still urging her to come and dare to climb to the top.

"How far?" Roland asked impatiently.

"Seven days give or take," Joe Collins said. Not seeming to have realized the weight his answer burdened the shoulders of the ka-tet he left them to their own devices, traveling to the kitchen for some unknown purpose.

"Seven days," Jake muttered, taking a seat by Cortana. "We're almost there. John has to be at the Tower." His eyes were hopeful and Cortana could not bring herself to crush it, "He has to be."

The gunslinger gave the picture on the wall one last look of longing before taking his own place on the couch, "He is." His statement was directed at Jake and the boy looked up at him, "When I reach Can-Ka No Rey I mean to have words with him." It was not so much what the gunslinger had said, but the way he said it, the level of certainty in his voice causing Cortana to eye him with suspicion. Movement in the adjacent room brought Cortana's attention to the doorway to the kitchen. From the door Joe Collins emerged carrying a single cup of steaming coffee which he offered to Cortana.

"No cream or sugar, hope you don't mind," he said.

"Not at all." She took the cup and sipped it slowly, allowing the warmth to fill her body. In the back of her mind she wondered why he had not offered Jake or Roland any, but since they did not make any comment Cortana dismissed it. I could be that he simply did not have that much coffee left, and had offered it to her as a way of courtesy. "So what did you do before you came to mid-world."

"Was a standup comedian believe it or not," the old man said. "And if you buy that I'll tell you that a few people actually found me funny. I was no George Carlin or Bill Cosby, but I did alright."

"We could use a good laugh," Jake said mildly, but even with the boy's half hearted suggestion Joe Collins leaped at the opportunity.

"Thought you'd never asked," he said, his wide smile beaming with its own radiance. He set his cane against the coffee table and began to stroke his chin once more, "Let's seeâ€|" He snapped his fingers as if suddenly stumbling upon a hidden revelation. "I got it. The bit I did in Cleveland Ohio. Never was able to finish it, but better late than never." He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath as he did, and when he opened them he appeared much younger, his features now lean and many of the wrinkles gone, his back straight and his bad leg not so stiff. "Alright it's been a while since I've done this so don't heckle me if I stink."

"Wouldn't think of it," Cortana said, giving him a soft smile.

Joe Collins closed his eyes again and began shaking his hands, almost like an athlete stretching before the big game. He opened them and began his routine, "Hey ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Jango's, I'm Joe Collins and you're not. The management has asked me to remind you that this is two-beers-for-a-buck night, and remember the more you drink the funnier I get." Cortana smiled politely, although so far Joe Collins had been far from funny. Still, comedians often memorized entire routines and it was sometimes difficult for them to start in the middle where all the good jokes lay hidden. So she waited

patiently for him to continue, "You know my folks are from Cleveland, but when they were seventy they moved to Florida. They didn't want to, but spitfire, it's the law!" At this Cortana chuckled, as did Jake, with Roland giving an amused grunt.

Alarm bells should have rung then and there, Jake being the only person who could have gotten that joke. Cortana may have known everything about the time period Joe Collins came from, but she lacked the cultural context that only comes from living through it to have truly understood the joke. And Roland? Roland had barely even heard of Cleveland, much less understood why old people moved to Florida. Still they were having a good time, and Cortana actually felt happy, so again she pushed these uncomfortable thoughts back.

"Florida, home of the newlywed and the newly dead. My grandfather retired to Florida ya know? When I die, I want to go peacefully, in my sleep, like Grampa Fred. Not screaming, like the passengers in his car." This time Cortana's chuckle was a full blown laugh and she attempted to cover her mouth, all while the voice of reason inside her which was growing smaller by the second was desperately shouting that the joke was not that funny. "But I was talking about Cleveland remember? You know how Cleveland got started? A bunch of people in New York said, 'Gee I'm starting to enjoy the crime and poverty, but it's not quite cold enough. Let's go west.'" The side's of Cortana's stomach began to hurt and she struggled for breath as her laughter continued, Jake doubling over next to her with his face turning a sickening shape of purple. It was then that a sound reached her ears, a sound that filled her with a level of fear and dread that she had not felt since encountering the Gravemind for the second time.

Roland was laughing. Not just laughing but roaring, his eyes ready to shed tears as the comedy overtook him. The gunslinger had never been above an occasional chuckle, although the instance was rare enough for Cortana to mark it on the proverbial calendar, but to outright laugh with abandon was something he would never have done. Not in a thousand life times.

_See, _the voice of reason said condescendingly to her. _See what we were trying to tell you? _Her first instinct was to reach for her gun, but the laughter still consumed her, racked her body with violent spasms that made it just as likely for her to shoot herself as she was to shoot Joe Collins. Her head ached as she attempted to focus her thinking, but Joe Collins continuous one liners made it impossible to string more than a handful of half formed thoughts together.

Oblivious to Cortana's realization of what he was, Joe Collins continued, "Marriage is having a wife or husband, bigamy is having a wife or husband too many, and divorce is a Latin term meaning 'to rip a man's genitals out through the wallet'." Another wave of laughter hit her and Cortana's coffee came tumbling out of her hands and on to her lap, the burning black liquid providing enough pain to shake her thoughts into focus.

"Bathroom," she said, wheezing in between chuckles. "I'll clean this up in the bathroom." Those few fragments were all she could manage, and for a fraction of a second she could see a flash of anger on Joe Collins face before he returned to his friendly demeanor.

"Good, and don't let the door bite you on the ass on the way out," Joe Collins called out to her turned back as Cortana stumbled down the hallway fighting back laughter with every bit of her being. Roland, who had looked as if he was going to rise to help her clean up the mess, fell back down on the couch, his hand every so often attempting to reach for the gun in his holster.

â€|

Cortana nearly slammed the bathroom door behind her, barely taking note of the room's appearance as she attempted to get the last chuckles out of her system. She needed time, time to regain control of her mind in body, although she wondered if that were possible so long as she was in Joe Collins house. The bathroom was fairly large considering the size of the house it was in, a fully furnished walk in shower, sink, and toilet accentuated with blue rugs on the floor with marble tile underneath of it, the walls painted a pale blue. Her heart was thudding in her chest as she attempted to control her breathing, thankful that the laughter had finally subsided which had been so painful that her ribs throbbed dully. Out of the corner of her eyes she saw something. The lid on the tank of the porcelain toilet was cocked to one side. Cautiously she moved towards it and lifted the lid off the tank and peered inside.

What she saw was a plastic sandwich bag underneath the water with two envelopes inside. She pulled the bag out and removed the two envelopes which were marked with the numbers 1 and 2. Cortana placed the number two envelope down and examined number one, the contents of the envelop jangling metallically as she moved it around. It was unsealed and Cortana reached her hand inside and what her fingers found made her chest tighten. Her fingers wrapped around the chain and Cortana pulled out a set of dog tags, the same dog tags she had buried at the foot of the Rose in the New York of 2012, three numbers shining in the bathroom light. She gazed at them for several seconds before dipping her hand again in the envelope, this time pulling out a folded up sheet of yellow legal paper. The hand writing on it was little more than chicken scratch, but Cortana was able to read the letter as if it were her own.

_Cortana, _

Put John's dog tags around your neck.

_Sincerely, _

Cor Tenebrae

_P.S. Deus Ex Machina _

Cortana read and reread the letter, sorely tempted to open up the second envelope and see what was inside. From the living room she heard Roland and Jake delve into another fit of forced laughter, and that strengthened her resolve. She stuffed the second envelope in her sweatshirt pocket and allowed the first one along with the letter to drop to the floor before putting John's dog tags around her neck. When she did she felt relieved, safe, as if John was standing right there with her, and perhaps he was. There was a loud crack, like a giant snapping his fingers, and the bathroom changed its appearance revealing to her what it really was. Mold stained the shower door,

the paint on the walls damp and peeling, the blue rugs stained with what looked like blood, and the toilet covered in filth and brown sewage. The smell was enough to make Cortana's stomach churn. She ignored it, ignored the decaying shit and piss and mold. Ignored all of it as she placed her hand on the handle and slowly opened the door.

88. Chapter 88: Author's Note

Chapter 88: Author's Note

She did her best to ignore the filth on the wall, much and grim piled high against the walls, cobwebs strung across the shadowed corners where spiders full of maliciousness and poison lay in hiding ready to pounce on any unsuspecting fly that would be naturally drawn to the stench that surrounded Cortana's entire body like a poisonous fog. She tried not to think about what she had actually drank from the mug that Joe Collins had given her instead of coffee. At first Cortana suspected it might have been poison, but a grain of intuition told her that a creature like him had no need or desire to poison his prey. No, he like Mordred preferred his victims to be filled with living blood once he started feeding, and her stomach revolted when the second thought of what the false coffee might actually have been, Cortana vowing to herself that she would change her stained pants as soon as she could. It was a trap, a trap more cleverly and insidiously devised than the glamour that Rando Thoughtful had used, for he had been human and Joe Collins was not. If Cortana was a daughter of none, then he was a son of none. She did not look at the walls for fear of what she might see, and completely missed a bumper sticker planted on it at a sharp angle.

****I LOVE DERRY MAINE****

And below that, written by an index finger dipped in blood were the wordsâ€|

****Pennywise Lives!****

As she stepped into the living room, the fireplace devoid of the roaring flames that she had seen before, the room itself a burnt out shell and the couch plagued by holes in the cushions and covered in a thick layer of dirt, she heard the tortured laughs of Roland and Jake, although now they sounded more like the screams they were. It was then that she saw Joe Collins true form.

Coulrophobia, the irrational fear of clowns, though if you were to look at Dandelo now you would believe that fear to be the most rational thing in all of existence. He stood there with a foot incased in a large orange clown shoe squarely on the gunslinger's chest, Roland struggling for breath, Jake in a similar position on the opposite side of the room, attempting to draw his pistol only have it fall limply from his hands as more laughter and insanity struck him. His face was painted white, with a Crimson bulbous nose and Crimson hair that rose several inches in the air and grew in wild directions, his eyes outlined in black and his irises bloodshot. He wore a baggy yellow suit with blue and purple polka doted sleeves and large plush orange buttons, his hands protruding long sickish yellow nails that ripped through the thick white gloves he was wearing. Dandelo looked at Cortana, seeing her as a meal rather than a person,

and smiled, his mouth now full of razor sharp fangs.

"Cortana daughter of none," he leered, the claws on his fingers clicking together as he spoke. "You may carry an heir to Arthur Eld in your brackish womb, but to me and Mordred you are nothing but the Spartan's blue bitch." Dandelo roared with laughter, spit flying off of his fangs as he did, forcing Jake and Roland to join in with him and creating a cacophony that vibrated in harsh waves through the shame of a living room. "Now here is another joke for ya, brought to you by the great and late Eddie Dean. Two gunslingers and a Spartan walk into a barâ€¦"

Dandelo never got to the punch line, and the wicked confidence in his eyes was replaced with a raging fear as Cortana drew her widow maker, the hammer cocked in a flash of movement and the blue steeled muzzle leveled at the creature's chest. The demon shifted, his legs tensing as his mind urged his body to move, to run to cover, but it was far too late for him and the first round struck him in the chest. He did not bleed, the gaping bullet wound spilling an orange light that would have surely driven Cortana back into the rampancy she had labored to free herself from if not for the talisman, the dog tags that she now wore. The fingers of her hand worked in perfect harmony as she continued to fire hot lead into the beast, Dandelo shrieking with primal rage and pain as four more bullets struck him. Dandelo's body twisted and contorted, the orange light nearly engulfing his entire body as his corporeal form was ripped from its foothold in reality, and Cortana aimed the last round with deliberate firmness, slinging the bullet straight into the demon clown's forehead. He gave one last guttural roar, his face cracking at the seams, his neck swing his head back and forth violently as his body began to shatter. With a final brilliant flash of orange the creature disintegrated.

Cortana's hand shook as smoke drifted from the revolver. Her hands disappeared, and when they rejoined the physical world six new bullets had been reloaded in the revolver's chambers. The gunslinger rolled onto his stomach, coughing and sputtering as he attempted to get fresh air back into his lungs, waving Cortana off as she knelt beside him, his hand gesturing to Jake whose face was exerting itself to return from a deep purple to its normal color. She went to him, helping the boy up on his feet, Jake nearly tipping over onto the floor again as he knelt to pick up the fallen pistol.

"When did you see it?" Roland asked, his voice hoarse.

"When you started laughing," Cortana said. "You never laugh."

Roland nodded, Cortana noticing a wince of pain on his face as he stood up, "I should have seen it."

"He hid himself," Jake said, still leaning on Cortana for support. "I didn't sense anything. It's like Mordred and the Gravemind. He could cloak himself from me."

Or maybe Mordred has been the one cloaking them, Cortana thought. "It doesn't matter, you're both safe." Subconsciously her arm went around Jake's shoulder and she held him protectively against her.

Roland walked slowly to the kitchen, his deliberate gate an effort to

hide the limp that was forming, the dry twist eating away at his joints with each passing day. He gazed into the room, revolver drawn, and moved to the door on the opposite end of the living room, what Cortana assumed was the bedroom. He made the same scan with his eyes and turned around, his gaze now directed at a door to the left of the kitchen entrance and to the right of the hallway that led to the bathroom. He marched to it and swung the door open, revealing a set of stairs that led to the abyss that was the cellar below the house.

"Stay here while I clear it," the gunslinger said resolutely.

"No," Cortana said, causing Roland to turn around. "Jake will go with you."

The boy removed himself from Cortana's grasp and turned towards her, "You're not safe by yourself."

"And I would feel safer if you two went together." Her voice left no room for protest. It was the voice of a mother, and not even the gunslinger dare defy it. Her words were true enough, but there was also an ulterior motive that she hid from them. "Go, I'll cover the door." As if to demonstrate her resolve Cortana sat on the couch, relieving the aching burden in her feet, and drew the long gun. Roland grunted and motioned with his head for Jake to follow him as he headed down the stairs, the boy giving Cortana a long meaningful look before going after the gunslinger.

Cortana listened as the footsteps faded into the darkness, and when she was sure that they were out of eyesight she took out the second envelope, fingers running over its smooth white surface, her other hand moving to feel John's dog tags which lay hidden underneath her sweat shirt. She opened it, gently pulling out and unfolding the yellow legal paper, the letter containing the same chicken scratch handwriting of the writer.

_Cortana, _

_For weeks, maybe even months, I have thought about what I would say to you in this letter. How I would say that I am sorry for John's death, for Susannah's, Callahan's, and Eddie's. That I am sorry for every loss and sorrow that you have had to endure since I began writing this story in November of 2012, and to ask for you to forgive me for any part that I may have had to play in it. But now I know. I know that I cannot be sorry, for if I was I would not be ready to do what I am about to do. _

_ There are many things I still do not know. I do not know why the White chose any of us, why I was to write the story but be forbidden to intervene until now, why there had to be so much hardship on the road that you traveled down. I do not know if it is the story that drives the characters, or the characters that drive the story. If free will does exist in some form, or if it is all just the wheel of ka turning in the midst of eternity. _

_ What I do know is that you are real. Those that have read this story may still think that this is all just a work of fiction, nothing more than a fantasy, but to me you have always been real. Every emotion, every loss, every moment of pain that you have felt I have felt also, and that is why I know that what I am about to do may

make you hate me even more._

_ I am not bringing John back, even though I could if I wanted to with just a thought. I have heard the voice of the White constantly since I began writing, have even heard your voice, and now I am hearing John's voice. He is telling me that he was just a voice in the wilderness preparing the way for the coming of his son. A bit more poetic than what he usually says, but then again he is quoting from yet another book. Still, may the gods help me, I believe he is right. That him coming back and you being safe are not the same thing. _

_ Remember the prophecies that Walter and Roland told you. They are true, even if the dark man used them to sow seeds of doubt and despair in your mind. You will be the end of the Line of Eld, but only because something much greater is coming to replace it. But in order for this to happen your son cannot, must not, be born in mid-world, and Roland must reach The Dark Tower before that happens.

_

_ And so I have a plan to send you to someplace you will be safe, where you can raise your son without fearing that someone will try to kill him before he can even walk, where the soldiers of the Red will never find him. Until thenâ€|_

Good Luck,

Cor Tenebrae

_Fredericksburg Virginia, March 31__st__ 2013_

_P.S. Look for the unfound door after the coming of the little god.

_

Cortana read and reread the letter, turning it over to see if there was more.

The little god, her son had been called that, and she suspected that Mordred had been called by that moniker as well. Walter had said that Mordred and her son were twims, but now after everything she had experienced Cortana wondered if there was such a thing as an anti twim. Two heirs of Arthur Eld, and only one could survive.

She flipped the letter over once more, eyes skimming over the words written in iron clad black ink, before placing it back into the envelope and tucking it neatly back into her pocket.

89. Chapter 89: The Last Enemy

Chapter 89: The Last Enemy That Shall Be Defeatedâ€|

Valentine is done,

Here but now they're gone

Romeo and Juliet are together in eternity

(Romeo and Juliet)

Forty-thousand men and women everyday

(Like Romeo and Juliet)

Forty-thousand men and women everyday

(Redefine happiness)

Another forty-thousand coming everyday

(We can be like they are)

Come baby, don't fear the Reaper

â€|

The twin sound of footsteps announced the entrance of Roland and Jake from the abyss of the cellar into the living room. Both their expressions were pale, and Jake who saw Cortana's questioning eyes shook his head, "It's bad." He left without another word, exiting the house with his eyes to the ground, causing Cortana to regret sending him down there with Roland.

She turned to Roland, only to find that the gunslinger was once again looking at the picture of The Dark Tower on the wall, and although she could not see his face Cortana could sense the longing desperation that clung to it. "What did you find down there?"

Roland was silent for several second before answering, "He was capturing people. Imprisoning them in the basement where he could feed on them like," he paused, gathering his thoughts. "Like a vampire." Slowly he shook his head, his eyes never moving from the picture, "We found a boy down there." He did not explain further, but Cortana could guess the rest.

"John is not coming back," she said, and the gunslinger's lack of a response, either physical or verbal, confirmed her suspicions. "But you already knew that didn't you? You always knew what that place really was."

"I did not know Iâ€|"

"Suspected," Cortana finished for him. The gunslinger knew little, but his guesses and intuitions were usually right. "Why didn't you tell me?" Her tone was not accusatory, but Roland shoulders sagged nevertheless.

"If I had told you the truth would you have believed me?" he asked, and Cortana found that she could not answer yes. She would never have believed it, not for a single second, and would likely have become infuriated with him for even suggesting that they would not find her Spartan. "You're leaving," he said, his words catching Cortana off guard and she shifted slightly on the couch. She had not thought that Roland would have been able to guess her attentions so accurately. Still his eyes never wavered from the photograph, although his voice nearly did, "When you leave take the boy with you."

"You can come with us," Cortana said. _You can break the cycle._

"No," Roland said softly. "I need to see it."

"Why?" Cortana asked, her frustration mounting. "Why are you so obsessed with reaching the Tower? Why do you need to see it and climb to the top?"

"So that I can be free," Roland said quietly. He did not yet know why those words were true, but they felt true. As Cortana rubbed her temples, wondering how she could convince him to go with her and Jake, or even if she should try, he asked, "How are you going to leave?"

Cortana paused the ministrations of her fingers on the side of her head as she answered him, "I was going to open a portal once I gave birthâ€¦" she let the sentence hang, but she was the only one that knew it. The writer had told her that her son could not under any circumstances be born in mid-world, and that he was going to provide a way for her to leave at some point. Cortana prayed that the writer would keep his promise, although she had her doubts.

"Do it," Roland said. For him the conversation was over and the heels of his boots made a dull thumping noise as he walked across the rotten floor boards of the house.

â€¦

They came to the stable where the horse Lippy, the animal that they had heard neighing as they approached unwittingly into Dandelo's lair, was housed, the building adjacent to the once homely cottage. When they first saw the horse the remnants of the ka-tet were filled with a mixture of pity and a hatred that none of them knew the origins of. The beast could barely be considered alive, with dull unseeing lifeless eyes, a mane of red rust colored hair with the rest of his body a pale green, the body itself gaunt with the ribcage clearly visible. They stood in silence watching the creature as one would watch a car wreck, horrified at what they were seeing but unable to look away. It was Cortana that broke the silence, and both Roland and Jake were grateful that she provided at least some distraction from the grotesque spectacle.

"I know what story he is from," she said, the others willingly tearing their eyes from the horse. "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came stanza fourteen. It makes sense that he would show up here at the end." She cleared her throat as she prepared to recite, "Alive? He might be dead for aught I know, with that red gaunt and colloped neck a-strain, and eyes shut underneath a rust mane; seldom went such grotesqueness with such woe; I never saw a brute I hated so; he must be wicked to deserve such pain." The silence overtook them once again when she finished, and Cortana dug into her considerable memory of both the past, present, and what little she could gleam from the future in order to destroy it again. "There is another story he is from. The Book of Revelations." She turned to Roland, "Have you heard of it?"

The gunslinger nodded, "A book of the Man Jesus. One of the gods of the Old People."

"Close enough," Cortana said. She had no want or desire to get into a theological discussion with him, a topic she never had any fondness of. "Revelations chapter six verse eight," she paused. Six plus eight

equaled fourteen, the same number as the stanza she had just quoted. It was ka, and it was also nineteen. "And I looked, and behold a pale horse. His name was Death." She turned her head towards the forest where Mordred lay in wait, ready to attack at the exact moment the ka-tet was at its weakest, "And Hell followed with him."

â€|

The military building was little more than a rundown shack, the sign posted out front having only two words that were still clearly visible, yet it was these words that announced to the three wanderers across the plains of existence that they were finally close to their ultimate goal, a goal that Cortana desperately did not want to reach. The Tower was still pulling on her, and she wondered how much this unknowable and unexplainable force had used her desire to see John again to draw her even closer to that inevitable demise. She set those thoughts aside for now, and focused on the sign in front of her.

****OUTPOST 19****

Next to the building was a robot, of a similar make and model as Andy of the Calla, except this machine had wheels instead of legs and a snowplow mounted on its now ruin chasses, its artificial spin arched backwards and cracked electronic eyes staring up at the passing Beam overhead, and its arms ripped violently from its torso and laying on the ground in a charred heap. The damage on the robot was knew, and Cortana did not bother to point out the obvious. She did however point out another speculation.

"He was suppose to help us," she said. It was an inevitable conclusion, the only reason why a robot in the middle of nowhere would have been attacked so viciously. "It makes sense. The Crimson King would have had access to the original Dark Tower series, so he would have known who was going to help us and had them taken out."

"How many others?" Jake asked. "How many do you think he's killed just because they might have helped us?" Cortana shook her head. There was no way of knowing, but she had a feeling that there had been quite a few that had been silenced before they ever got a chance to help the ka-tet.

The gunslinger turned away from the wreckage and focused on the road ahead. "He said seven days."

"Could have been lying," Jake said. "He was lying almost from the start."

Roland shook his head, "It's seven."

"It is," Cortana agreed. Again this was not something that she could explain, but there was something important about the number seven. She knew of course that it had been Bungie's favorite number, but she guessed that the reasoning was more elemental than that. Had not Roland said when the seven of them first met as ka-tet that it was a number of power much like nineteen? Was it perhaps nineteen's twim, or like Mordred and her son its anti twim? She did not know, nor would she ever know. In the condition her body was in it would be a miracle if it did not take them fourteen days to reach the pylon, but

if it took them that long it might be too late for the writer's plan to work. "We have to get to the Tower in seven days, no matter what," she said, her thoughts directed at the gunslinger. _You have to get to the Tower in seven days. _

"We will," Roland said, and then similarly directed his thoughts at Cortana. _I will. _

â€|

It was the night of the sixth day, the stars showering down their brilliance on the grassy plain and the simple two lane road that led to the center of all that is, was and shall be. Mordred crept in the darkness, still in his human form but not for long. He had waited for the perfect time to strike and the voices urging, the voice that had guided him through the wilderness in search of the ka-tet, the voice that made him stronger with each passing day, the voice that had warned him not to eat the creature Lippy, for such a beast carried only death to those that were foolish enough to devour him.

(Come my son. Kill the usurper before the Intellect gives birth to him tomorrow. Then come to me, and together we shall destroy the Tower and rule the darkness that follows)

It was The Crimson King, the one Mordred now considered to be his true father, not the leader of the pitiful band that still dared to call itself ka-tet, the aging warrior with arthritis creeping into his joints and a mind full of painful memories. No, the Red king was his true father, and Mordred as the dutiful son would not dare disappoint him. The blue bitch as Mordred preferred to think of her was on the eve of giving birth, which meant she was at her weakest, had already pushed herself harder in the past week than she had in the past three, and Mordred wondered what the new found sense of urgency was.

_Of course, _he thought. _It is because they know I am coming. They know that a god is coming. _

He stopped, his bare feet cool against the lush green grass, and felt the familiar fire of burning steel enter his body as he began to change, skin growing dark black hair, and eight long legs sprouting where four use to be, eight eyes popping up to replace the two blue ones, sharp fangs protruding from his mouth. His spider form, his true form. Here his genius was reduced considerable, with the primary instinct (SLEEP, EAT, RAPE, KILL) holding its sway over the majority of his mind. Still, it was a strong mind, and his body was even stronger. Strong enough to kill the usurper and the woman that carried him, along with the two gunslingers should they be foolish enough to stand against him. Nothing, not even his uncle, the grave of whom Mordred had taken time to gloat over and spit on the rifle butt containing the numbers 117, could stop him. The Spartan was dead, the ka-tet was broken, and Mordred was filled with the anticipation of this final meal.

â€|

Orange, red, and even blue flames flickered in and out of the small fire, Roland keeping constant vigil over it. He dared not sleep, not with his son so close in pursuit, not when she was so close to giving birth. He prayed that she would give birth soon, preferable before

his son decided to strike. Then she could leave and take Jake with her, and he would be left to face Mordred alone. He could not die, ka would not allow him to, and his only fear was for the safety of the two that were still with him. He glanced over at Cortana who was sleeping soundly next to him under a blanket of deer skins, and noticed that a few strands of hair had fallen in front of her face. Gently her reached out a callused hand and brushed them away, taking care not to wake her.

"You love her," it was Jake, the boy laying close beside Cortana. He did not show it, but the gunslinger had been startled when Jake spoke, and mentally scolded himself for being so distracted.

"Go back to sleep Jake," Roland said. The boy stared at him, the light of the fire reflecting off of his eyes, but before Roland could say the words again more forcefully he rolled over.

A sudden movement in the darkness ahead caught Roland's attention. He strained his eyes, the eagle vision cutting through the blackness and catching the sight of a single hairy leg. Jake sat up fully, and Cortana sensing the danger or perhaps the movement of the two men on either side of her woke up. Her senses were still dulled from sleep, and she struggled to snap them back into focus, standing up as the others did and drawing the revolver. There was another flicker of movement, and upon seeing it she became fully awake. The two gunslingers moved in front of her, protecting her, and more importantly protecting her son just as she protected him, Cortana being his last and best line of defense. She was his appointed guardian, and Cortana would fight until her last breath to keep him safe, to keep her last link to John safe. Yet, as her thumb moved to cock the hammer on the long gun back a sudden and unbearable pain hit her with such unrelenting force that Cortana was propelled onto her back. Her body shuddered at the impact, her back which was already aching from the burden she carried now nearly immobile, the blue steeled revolver flying out of her hand. It was with increasing panic that she realized that her arms were pinned to the ground by an unseen force, and that the same force was forcing her legs to open.

Jake and Roland spun around as they heard Cortana's cries of pain, and it was precisely the distraction that Mordred needed and had counted on. He came at them like a wrecking ball, the quick reflexes of the gunslingers not enough to prevent two of his legs from striking them in the chest. They flew backwards, and in some distant world Cortana heard Jake's head make a sickening crack as it landed on a rock. It was then that she saw Mordred for the second time, the giant spider no longer a child but a full grown monster easily the size of an adult Grizzly, the red eye still clearly visible on his back, the multitude of seeing eyes on his face full of malevolence and pure hatred. He scuttled towards her, and Cortana fought with all of her strength to free herself from the invisible restraints. From the corner of her vision she saw Roland running towards the two of them. In a flash of speed he was between the two of them, his arms outstretched, with no gun in his hand.

"Mordred stop!," he yelled, and instead of bowling him over as he had done before Mordred did halt, looking at the face of his father for the first time up close, Roland looking at the face of his son for the first time ever. Cortana expected at any moment for Mordred to attack, to knock the gunslinger aside, again and again if need be,

and continue on his rampage. Instead he did no such thing, as if he was unsure of what to do, and Roland took this opportunity to speak.

"It's not your fault," his voice carried a tone that neither Cortana nor Mordred expected. It was his usual monotone, but underneath it all Cortana could hearâ€|.

Her mind revolted at the thought, but still it was there. Love, unconditional love.

"It's not your fault," Roland continued. "That you are the way you are. Its mine." Mordred's eyes seemed to grown wide at Roland's statement, at these unexpected words from his father. "I know what it's like, to be afraid and alone. I know that you are angry." Mordred's eyes move downward as Roland continued to speak, and they moved back and forth as he listened. "But you don't have to do this," the gunslinger lowered his hands and reached one of them out to touch Mordred on the head. "Son please, let me help you." It was Roland's touch that tipped the balance in Mordred's mind, the hot rage flooding back to replace the doubt that the gunslinger had placed into his mind. He shook the gunslinger's hand off of his head and with his two forward legs grabbed him. Roland struggled in Mordred's grip, but his son's strength far surpassed that of his father and Mordred flung him high into the air and it was only the distance thump that his body made when it hit the ground that told Cortana that he had landed.

It was at this moment that Cortana felt the restraints loosen on her and she seized on the opportunity, scrabbling for the gun that had been just out of her reach. The crushing weight of Mordred's hair leg slammed into her hand just as it was about to grab the revolver, and Cortana screamed in agony, the pain threatening to propel her into unconsciousness as the bones in her right hand were smashed. She had just enough time to turn her head and see Mordred hovering over her. His fangs glistened, and with a single sharp movement they swung downwards.

â€|

_The love of two is one, _

_Here but now they're gone _

_Came last night of sadness, _

_And it was clear that she couldn't go on _

_The door was open and the wind appeared, _

_The candles blew and then disappeared, _

_The curtains flew and then he appeared, _

_Sayingâ€| _

â€|

(Don't be afraid)

It was his voice, and Cortana was not surprised that she would hear him right before she died, and she had no fear. She closed her eyes, waiting to run to him in the fields of Can-Ka No Rey, and maybe her son would also be there fully formed as the White had said. She waited, but still the fatal blow did not come. Her eyes opened and she saw Mordred fangs hovering just over her chest. She looked down and saw what had stopped his assault. The dog tags had been removed from their hiding spot underneath her shirt, and were hovering several inches above her chest. They vibrated and clanged together, and if Cortana strained her ears she could just barely make out the song of the Rose, the song of Gan.

Pure, blinding, unfiltered light entered the void between Mordred and his prey and he was flung backwards, all eight of his eyes blinded and his mind reeling with pain. Cortana was also blinded by the light, her vision filled with green and purple and her nose smelled the hint of fresh grass. She blinked rapidly, and when her vision cleared she saw him.

He stood like a stone wall between her and Mordred, arms crossed, back rigid, and Cortana thought that this was a final hallucination, that the spider's fangs had actually pierced her chest and she was dreaming of him one last time. As she continued to look at him she saw that the figure, not the dog tags, were the source of the white light which surrounded his entire body and rolled over him like a living flame. It was Mordred's reaction that told her that this was more than just a dying hallucination, the giant spider taking several steps backwards as his vision cleared and he caught sight of his new and unexpected foe.

John had returned.

â€|

Now constant reader, ye of so little faith and even less understanding, see this and see it well.

90. Chapter 90: The War in Heaven

Chapter 90: The War in Heaven

I was born

Six gun in my hand

Behind a gun

I'll make my final stand

...

Seven Days Before the Coming of the Wolves (Space/Time Anomaly)
Father Callahan's Church, The Calla, Mid-World

The old priest sat on one of the pews of his church, an aging bible in his hands the binding of which had already been broken, pages ready to fall out between the two black covers, the golden wording on the front faded. "I bet you didn't know," he said, patting the book in his hand and looking at Cortana who sat in the pew across from

him. "That there are actually two gods in this book."

Of course Cortana did know, but she wanted to be polite and instead shook her head.

Callahan chuckled, "You dare lie to a man of the cloth? It's hard to believe that you didn't know, you being as smart as you are."

"Maybe I just wanted to hear your take on it," Cortana said, smiling at him.

"Maybe," Callahan said, looking down at his bible. "I know you don't believe in either of them, and that's alright with me." He smiled again at her, "There is a great deal of difference between you and me Cortana, but I can tell you are a good person, and you don't need to believe in God to be that."

"And which one of those gods in that book of yours do you believe in?" Cortana asked. She was truly curious. Callahan was right, they would never be able to reconcile his devotion to Catholicism and her lack of any religious beliefs, but she could not deny that he was a good person. The only person she had ever found herself willing to discuss theology with beyond a purely academic level.

"Well," Callahan said, placing a hand on his chin, his arm covering up his white collar. "There is the God of the New Testament, the one of faith, hope, and love. The one of forgiveness and understanding." His features then hardened, and he seemed to age several years right before Cortana's eyes. "And then there is the old God. The God of the Israelites'; of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The God that flooded the Earth to kill all the living creatures of the land, that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and killed all the first born sons of Egypt. The God of wrath and vengeance." He shook his head, and his eyes seemed to glaze over, "He is not a God that anyone in their right mind would love or worship, unless it was through fear, but sometimes he is the God that you want on your side when your enemies close in around you. The God that I prayed to when I faced the vampire Barlow." His eyes focused again and he looked at Cortana, "And he is the God that I pray to now."

â€|

END-WORLD

The pain in Cortana's hand was eructating, and gingerly she held it up to her face, wincing at what she saw. Her right hand would never be used again, and all the UNSC medical technology in the world apart from cloning her a brand new one would not have been enough to save it. The fingers twisted at odd angles, the thumb hanging on by a mere thread of skin and muscle, bones poking through her palm and leaking blood down her wrist. She held the useless stub to her chest as she worked her way up to her knees, her eyes finding John's back. The White light continued to surround him, but unlike before it was not blinding. Beyond him she could see Mordred, the giant spider appearing cautious as if he was unsure of what to do.

Then, lighting rippled across the sky, the single spear of the electric bolt splitting into seven prongs, the thunder following swiftly behind. It came with such violence as to shake the ground beneath her and Cortana fell onto all fours and clung to the Earth

for fear that she would be thrown off of it. The ground heaved, fissures erupting all around her, the two lane road cracking, the asphalt turning into dust, and Mordred seemed to be struggling to stay on all eight legs as the force of the blast seemed to bend the fabric of space and time itself.

_Mjolnir, _Cortana thought. She could not help but think it. _The real Mjolnir._ She struggled to get back onto her knees, and even as heaven and Earth appeared to be falling apart around her, Cortana's eyes and thoughts were only for the man she loved. _John what did you do? _The White flame was still surrounding him, the Spartan appearing unconcerned with the cataclysm that followed his reappearance in the realm of the living. _What kind of deal did you make? _

â€|

John had expected him to appear now, the closest thing he had ever had to a father walking in front of him, his appearance like a hologram that only he could see.

Mendez looked at John, taking in his new state, living energy cascading over the Spartan making him stronger now than he had ever been in his previous life. Then his eyes went to the pregnant woman behind John, Cortana still holding the bleeding hand to her chest, "You weren't suppose to fall in love 117."

"I wasn't," John said, his own eyes still squarely on Mordred.

The Petty Officer shook his head, "And if you had I would have expected it to be with Kelly or Linda, not some computer. One of Halsey's experiments." He said the last word with distaste, and John felt the stirrings of cold anger towards the man who had taught him nearly everything he knew.

"She is not a machine."

"No," Mendez said. "That was what we were trying to make you into." He turned back towards the Spartan, crossing his arms in a similar fashion as him. "I told you once that there is a difference between wasting a life and spending it. So which have you done with yours?"

"Spend it," John said. "She is more important to me than anything else."

"Even your own soul?" Mendez asked, and the Master Chief did not answer. "You sold your soul to the devil just to save her." John shook his head. He had not sold his soul to the devil, but he had made a deal. Mendez looked at Cortana again, "If she is worth that much to you, then you better not lose her again."

"I won't."

â€|

_He's dead, _Mordred thought, doubt and fear flooding through him. _It's glammer, just a trick_, and as if to prove to himself that it was Mordred pushed with his mind against the phantom, only to have it shoved back at him, nearly knocking him off balance once more. It could not be possible, Mordred having gone out of his way to visit

Algul Siento and see the Spartan's grave once he learned of his death, had dug up the body and feasted on the rotting flesh within the armored casket. And yet here he stood, an iron curtain blocking off Mordred's access to that one ultimate goal, that final meal that would guarantee his ascendancy. His mind reeled, wondering how in the name of all the gods he could possibly defeat an enemy that had conquered death itself. So he reached for another weapon in his vast auxiliary. He began to bargain.

(My quarrel is with neither of you gunslinger. Stand aside and I will let the woman live. I have only come for the child)

His voice was booming, rippling the air in front of him, and still the Spartan just stood there, his face devoid of any expression, his eyes tearing into Mordred as if they themselves were swords. What ate at Mordred most though was how calm he appeared. Mordred reached out with his mind again, this time aiming for Cortana. He had no sooner established a link then to have the mental tether cut in half. He had seen enough though, enough to tempt the Spartan into yielding without a fight.

(I can give her eternal life, spare you both when the Tower falls. You and her will always be together. Just stand aside and I will give you everything)

John's eyebrows furrowed, the only expression he allowed to appear on his face, and when he spoke his voice was as calm as he appeared, as if he and Mordred were discussing something as mundane as the weather and not the life of his unborn son.

"No."

With this one word, Mordred's baser instincts destroyed reason and he howled with rage at the interloper, the man who dared defy him in such a way as to make the matter seem trivial. Red flame enveloped him, contrasting with the White that surrounded John, and he attacked focusing all of his hatred, fear, and anger at the man in front of him. The fire burst outward, scorching the grass underneath it, burning the very air itself, only for it to be met with the flame of the White. The ground began to shake again as the two aura's pushed against each other, thunder rolling on top of the lighting that was continuing to flash overhead, and Mordred felt the unthinkable happen. He was being pushed backwards, his eight legs dragging into the dirt as he attempted to remain standing. With each push against John an even more powerful push was sent back against him, and Mordred struggled to comprehend what was happening, what his opponent truly was.

He was the unwavering constant, both the unstoppable force and the immovable object, the single light of hope that shown bright in the darkness, the voice in the wilderness. He wasâ€¦

No! Mordred internally screamed, rejecting wholeheartedly the unrelenting conclusion. _He can't be. I refuse to believe it._ But he could not move him, Mordred who was to rule over everything, to be a living god and the king of all, could not defeat this one warrior even with all of his strength brought to bear. The flames continued to dual with one another, and if Mordred was still in his human form sweat would be pouring off of him, and yet the Spartan still remained unphased even as the twin fires and heat swirled around him.

(WHAT ARE YOU?)

Mordred screamed, yelled with everything held deep within him, and his own Red flame grew as he shouted the words.

John tilted his head forward, his White aura growing in response, remaining on the offensive even as Mordred kicked and flailed against the onslaught, "I am a soldier of the White."

As he spoke, on the plains of a thousand other worlds, the skies darkened and the ground shook, all of reality being squeezed by the hands of a deity that was quick to anger and slow to forgive, and as it happened John's own hands clenched into fists. Earthquakes erupted, volcanoes spewing out the guts of the Earth, tsunamis bashing against shorelines. A thousand natural disasters separated from one another by time and space but all connected together by one single event. And in this reality that we are looking at through the lens of the written word, the skies turned an albino White behind John, clouds tumbling across the horizon as they marched towards the two figures locked in their own dual of fire and brimstone, and through the firmament Cortana could swear that she saw a giant turtle swimming across the heavens.

(See the turtle of enormous girth. On his shell he holds the Earth.)

Trumpets blared across the heavens, and Cortana covered ears as the air vibrated around her, the strength of the noise threatening to drive her insane. She could keep her eyes open just enough to see that behind Mordred Crimson clouds had appeared, spreading across the sky like an army across the fields of Megiddo.

_And that's what they are, _Cortana thought. _They're armies. _She continued to squint, her hearing dulled, her senses weak, before shutting them again and bracing herself as the armies of the White and the Red prepared to clash overhead, the passing Beam serving as the front line. When the expected aftershock did not come she opened her eyes only to find herself surrounded by the same White flame that surrounded John. His hand was stretched out behind him, palm wide open, his temples tensing as he concentrated on protecting her and defeating Mordred at the same time. Around them rocks shot up from the ground and splintered like wood in the air, pillars of dirt flowing like water as the world shook itself apart, and above her Cortana could hear the faint sound of swords and shields clashing against one another.

Her eyes went back to John, remembering the conversation she had with Callahan all those months ago, realizing too late what her Spartan had become just to save her and their son. _He's a€|_

a€|

_God, _Roland thought, the gunslinger flat on his stomach, pain eating away at all of his joints like lava as he struggled just to keep his head up. He could not clearly see the figure shrouded in light, its own aura pushing back against that of his son, but he was sure of what and who it was. One of the gods of Gilead, he who is sometimes called Thor, Mars, Ares, Indra, Anhur, and Mixcoatl.

Belus, the god of war.

He struggled to see through the clashing lights, but could not find Jake and did not know if the boy was alive or dead. What he could see was Cortana, her right hand broken and bleeding, shielded by a wall of light that seemed to be tenuous at best, Mordred who had once been on the defensive now regaining his footing and striking back at the god with as much fury as he could muster. He saw the two armies of Crimson and White clouds over head, each unable to gain an advantage over the other, both evenly matched. The gunslinger thought that if left to their own devices they would fight for all eternity, just as the White and the Red have always done. Unlessâ€¦

Roland attempted to rise to his feet, but the arthritis that filled his body had finally beaten him down, had worn him to the point where he was little more than a thinking head on top of a useless body. He fell back on the ground, not even able to close his hands in frustration, and in defeat he placed his forehead on the cool vibrating dirt.

The gunslinger heard many voices, those of his dead gunslingers, the voice of Susan, his mother and father, the dark man who would occasionally enter his head to taunt him, and of Vannay who had tutored him and the other gunslingers in what little math and science was left in mid-world. But more than anyone else he heard the voice of Cort. The man who trained, beat, starved, and regimented him. The brutally scared war veteran who had turned him into a machine built only for lead and death. The man who for the longest time Roland thought could not die. It was his voice that he heard now.

(Get up you worthless maggot)

Roland propped himself on his elbows, his hands now all but useless, and again was rewarded by a sharp knife of pain and a face full of mud as he fell down. He could see Cort now standing over him, the club he use to beat him with in his hand, a look of contempt on his face.

(You were never the strongest, or the fastest, or the smartest, or even the best with a gun, but never did I take you for a coward that would lie in the mud while he watched his comrades die. Now get up!)

A fresh wave of energy swept through the gunslinger, determined to get up if only to spite his old teacher. He worked his left hand into a fist, grunting in silent agony as he felt the joints crack, but when he released the fist he found he could work his hand again, if only barely. He pushed with his left hand on the ground and got onto his knees, and then slowly onto his feet, swaying and threatening to fall over as blood rushed back into his head. Roland found his footing and reached for his revolver. He filled his lungs full of air and with one tremendous effort let it out.

"MORDRED!"

His son was unable to turn towards his father's voice, too consumed was he in the current battle with the Spartan, but his eyes did find the gunslinger and when they saw the gun of Arthur Eld in Roland's hand all eight eyes widened with panic.

The gunslinger fired, his shot deliberate, his movements sluggish as he pulled the hammer back again, faintly registering the bullet wound that opened up in Mordred's hourglass midsection. He continued to pour hot lead into the giant spider, hair covered legs ripping off of the torso they were attached to, Roland unable to aim except with his own iron will, his legs shaking as he stepped towards his son. Four more times the revolver thundered, four more times Mordred howled in pain as his life was slowly taken away, the Crimson aura that surrounded him growing smaller and weaker by the second. With one final effort Roland cocked the hammer back, the arthritis threatening to stay his trigger finger. He grunted as he pulled the lever with all his might, the recoil bashing against his shoulder. The gunslinger fell to his knees, the revolver hanging limply in his hands as he saw the final bullet smash into Mordred's head, dashing out four of his eyes, and spilling green acid onto the scorched grass. The Crimson flame sputtered and died, the White flame that John commanded quickly coming to replace it, stealing what was left of Mordred's life as it set the giant spider on fire, the smell of burning black hair filling the air.

Roland did not see the Crimson clouds recede overhead as the armies of the White swept them off of the celestial field of battle, did not hear the triumphant shout of a billion souls heralding the hard won victory. His vision was clouded, darkness ebbing at the corners, and he blinked, hanging on to consciousness in the hope that he could at last clearly see this god that had come to their aid.

The figure walked towards him, the White light receding from around his body, and Roland's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"John?"

The darkness completely overtook him and Roland fell forward, his body limp, embracing unconsciousness and perhaps the death he had so longed hoped for.

Three bodies lay motionless on the blackened field.

Only John and Cortana remained.

91. Interlude

Interlude

Those who have crossed

With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom

Remember us-if at all-not as lost

Violent souls, but only

As the hollow men

The stuffed men

T.S. Eliot

The Hollow Men

â€|

John blinked. The last thing he remembered was looking up at Cortana's face. Her eyes had been full of tears and her forehead had been pressed against his. He was standing up now, wearing nothing more than his under suit, although he had not recollection of actually standing up. Cautiously he reached a hand up to his face, not at all surprised to find that his right eye was no longer a bloody wound where a round had passed clean into his frontal lobe, but was instead perfectly formed and back in its socket. He was sure that he was dead, had experienced it before, but what he had not experienced the last time was the ability to think. The last time had just been nothing, an absence of feeling or thought that had stretched on for eons, and then the blaring brightness of the desert sun. _

He wondered briefly if ka had seen fit to send him back once again, but immediately dismissed the thought. The area he was now standing in was tantalizingly familiar, and certainly nothing he had ever experienced in mid-world. School children were running around in what appeared to be a play ground, a small grassy hill in the distance where a number of boys and a few girls were busy fighting to see who could be on top, and what appeared to be a married couple sitting on a bench, the woman busy running her fingers on a data pad._

He blinked again as he continued to look at the woman. It was Doctor Halsey, but she looked so young now that he had almost not recognized her. He continued to look at her, the doctor's eyes on one boy in particular who was currently the reigning king of the hill, noting just how similar her younger self was to Cortana. They did not look exactly the same, but the comparison was striking. _

The full memory, which with the passing of time had not completely left his mind but was still little more than a blur, hit him. He saw Halsey call his younger self out of the group of children, and John did not recognize the boy he saw. He looked, happy. Completely carefree and excited about the prospects that life had for him. John also noted how similar he looked to Jake. His younger self's hair was brown not blonde and the eyes were a slightly different shape of blue, but if he were to put his younger self and Jake together they could easily be mistaken for brothers. The entire scene was silent, and the Master Chief was unable to hear the words that were spoken, only half remembering what was said. What he did remember clearly was him snatching the quarter out of the air and confidently yelling 'eagle', a correct prediction that would win him the only thing he had ever truly owned, except perhaps the hard caliber he had worn which was his by birth right. _

Just as Halsey was about to open up the boy's fist to peer at the quarter hidden underneath his tiny fingers, the scene stopped. John looked around, momentarily confused, but his eyes widened slightly when he saw a free standing ghost wood door, exactly the same as the one they had found in the Doorway Cave. It stood in the middle of the lawn as if it had always been there, the door knob calling for him to open it, and John's heart began to beat slightly faster wondering if this was the doorway back to her. Several long strides brought him to the doorway, and with a quick twist of the wrist he opened it. _

_ What greeted him next was not what John had expected. It was neither mid-world nor another one of his memories. It was a of a husband and wife, the man with a short marine regulation haircut, the woman several months pregnant. They were holding each other, his arm wrapped around her shoulder and his other hand on her stomach feeling his unborn child's first kicks. The man looked familiar to John, but he could not place where he had seen the man before. The image of the couple in the small apartment suddenly shimmered, the silent colors washing away like water, and what replaced them made the Master Chief's blood run cold._

_ He now remember where he had seen the man before, here on an orbital platform high above the planet Reach, in a boxing ring of a gym. The man stood there with several others, surrounding a boy of fourteen, goading the young Spartan to fight at the urging of their Sergeant, and several ONI officials who kept themselves hidden safely in the shadows. John watched as his fourteen year old self take on all four men at once, and it was the soon to be father that was the first he had killed, John punching him repeatedly up against the ropes, his movements far too rapid for the ODST's to track or react to, his movements lacking the fluidity that would arrive once he became fully accustomed to his augmentations, but the strength and power behind his blows was still something the Master Chief could almost feel as he watched the man go limp. The scene stopped, just as the last one had, and John's mind went into overdrive. _

_ The man he had killed all those decades ago had a wife and a baby on the way. For some reason that resonated with him, although he did not yet understand why. At the time he had felt some emotional conflict over his actions, but Chief Mendez had been quick to assure him that he had done the right thing by neutralizing the threat, that all he had to worry about was following orders. John had never even considered that the ramifications of his actions went far beyond what had transpired at the gym, or even with ending the lives of those men. He thought of the soon to be mother having to raise her child by herself, never knowing exactly how or why her husband had died. _

_ John forced those uncomfortable thoughts out of his mind. Mendez had been right. He had followed orders, the Sergeant having told him to fight, and the targets had been threats which needed to be neutralized. It was not as if he could have refused to fight._

_ His mind nearly halted again. Refuse to fight, the concept was completely foreign to him, a possibility he had never considered before. _

_ He shook his head, his eyes going to the door at the opposite end of the gym. It was far from being a ghost wood door, but he could still feel it calling to him, and John dutifully stepped through.

_

_ Again it was not his own memory he was seeing, but the scene had been the result of his own actions. It had been his first real mission as a Spartan, before he had even received his MJOLNIR combat armor, to secure Insurrectionist leader Colonel Watts whose forces were hiding out in an asteroid in the Epsilon Eridane system. Sam, Kelly, Fred, and Linda; what Roland might have called his original ka-tet had all been present for this mission, the true graduation ceremony for the young Spartan super soldiers. Of course it was not him or his team that the vision was focusing on, but its aftermath.

—

_ He stood in the space dock of the Insurrectionist asteroid base, hundreds of civilians and dockworkers, all of them non combatants, walking around completely unaware of the chaos that was about to beset them. John tensed himself, preparing for the blast he knew was about to come, but when it happen the explosion was just as silent as everything else had been, and the Master Chief did not even feel the shockwaves or the heat coming from the detonated plastic explosives as a hole was torn through the space dock. What he did see was the look of panic, which soon turned to fear, and even more quickly into pain as the bodies of the civilians were flung out of the gaping hole and into the void, their lungs gasping for air that was not there, bodies being torn apart by the lack of pressure._

_ John had been in charge of the operation, had held tactical command, could have easily not have ordered for the explosives to be placed, had known how many civilian lives detonating them would have cost. But he had still done it, and the reason was still the same. He had been following orders, although now those words were seeming more like an excuse than an actual reason. Again the Master Chief attempted to force the unwanted thoughts out, but still they persisted. _

No, _he thought. _I followed orders, neutralized a threat, served in the best interests of the UNSC and humanity. There is nothing more to it.

(John, do you still not understand?)

_The voice was familiar to him, and the Master Chief instantly recognized what it was. The voice of the White was still firm as always, but unlike last time John could hear a trace of sadness in it, and an overwhelming sense of disappointment. _

(The strong exist to protect the weak)

"I have protected the weak," John replied, and he was right. He had always protected those who could not protect themselves, had placed the lives of civilians above everything else during the Human Covenant War, but as he stood there motionless watching as the bodies of the dead floated past him with their organs turned to jelly by the vacuum of space the words felt hollow.

(Were they not weak, did they not also need protection, from people like you?)

John tensed his muscles, his fingers twitching, the only outward evidence he gave of his growing anger, "My actions saved lives." He clenched his jaw, noticed the involuntary display of emotion, and worked to reverse it, "How can you judge me?"

(How could you judge them?)

_ John had no reply to this question, and from the corner of his eye he saw another ghost wood door. He moved towards it, ducking beneath the floating bodies and crates that bounced off one another, wrestling internally with himself over what the White had said to him. He remembered now his initial doubts about the morality of the mission, and how quick he had been to dismiss his own misgivings. A

soldier's duty was to protect others and follow orders, but now the idea that those things sometimes contradicted one another was pushing into him as if it was being placed there by another entity. As he approached the door another thought, this one just as foreign and not of his own making as all the others came to him. He had disobeyed an order once. When Cortana's life was on the line, when his own personal interests had been at stake, he had disobeyed. The entity that was thrusting these thoughts onto his conscience seemed to take this as proof that he was not an automaton, that no matter who gave the orders or what they were his soul still belonged to him and him alone._

_ With crisp fluid movements John opened the final door and his face was suddenly washed with blue, a dull ache appearing on the center of his chest. This had been where she had died, in the cylinder of hard light, the place and moment of his greatest failure. He saw himself in his armor standing a full head above Cortana's avatar of hard light who was pressing a hand against his chest and speaking soft words to him, words that John did not need to hear. The moment was burned into his memory, but he noticed something now that he had not noticed before. In what they had both thought as her final goodbye John had not been able to look her in the eye, as if diverting his gaze would undo what had already been done. Still Cortana had sought the face behind his armor and he had caught glimpses of her emotions at that moment, but now that he was able to see all of them he wondered if she had loved him even then._

_ It was the quiet nights in the Calla, with the summer air blowing through the open window of their shared bedroom that John had come to terms of how he felt about her, emotions that he could not express in words even on the eve of his second death. A realization he had not permitted himself to make or even think about when he had still been a soldier of the UNSC, had attempted to bury and forget in the seven months between her death and his first. The Calla, the time he had spent there with her was the closest he had ever come to being a civilian, an entire month without fighting. He remembered, remembered how they would stay up even as the night grew old, Cortana laying with her head against his chest. Sometimes she would talk and he would listen, slight touches and short answers being his usual response. Often they would lay there in silence, and it was those nights that John had come to truly appreciate, Cortana listening to his heartbeat and him feeling hers. Every so often she would kiss him, and although they were quick and chaste, a mere prelude to what would happen between them in Fedic, John had grown to look forward to them. The first he had not returned, the second awkwardly, and the third just as clumsily. It was something he never had any experience in, something he never thought he was good at, but Cortana never complained, had seemed to enjoy the fact that there was at least one thing she was better at than him. A game she could always beat him at. In the bunker beyond Algul Siento she had talked about wanting to go to the mid twentieth century, a time period John had no interest in, but he could not come up with a better place to go. Now as the memories of that single month washed over him he knew. He would want to go back to the Calla. _

(Would you let it happen again? Would you let her die?)

_The image of Cortana's farewell froze as the White spoke, and its words triggered something in John. A need to react, to do, to be the man of action as he always had been. The feeling came and went,

tempered by the knowledge that while he was in this state there was nothing he could do. Still he answered with a firm, "No."_

(What will you do?)

_ "I'll fight." It was what he had always done, what he was best at, but from the other side of the vast void John heard a low sigh._

(There are some enemies which even you cannot defeat, and Mordred is stronger now than he was before. You cannot win, not as you are now. But, as what you can become!)

Before?_ John thought. The statement did not make sense to him, at least not now. Slowly the realization of Roland's predicament would come upon him and John would know the truth, but for now it eluded him. He pushed the thought away, focusing instead on what took priority over it. Cortana was in danger, and if the White said that he could not defeat Mordred then Roland, Eddie, and Jake could neither. They were good, would be on par with any Spartan II if they had augmentations, and John suspected that they already surpassed many of the Spartan IVs, but they like him had their limitations. If Mordred was as powerful as the White said he was then they needed his help. The White was offering him a chance at redemption, and John would take it. _

(Not just redemption. Atonement.)

_John paused at the statement, wondering just when the White had entered his mind, or if it had always been able to sense his thoughts. _

(But with all power comes sacrifice)

_A child ran past him with a burst of speed. He was no more than a few years old but already he ran fast enough to give high school track stars a run for their money. John caught a glimpse of his face as the boy ran past, brown freckles sprinkled lightly over his cheeks, his nose and brilliant blue eyes like his father's and black hair like his mother which came in thick but was cut short and neatly combed. John watched the child as he ran into the arms of his mother, and Cortana embraced him, holding the boy against her as the child squeezed back. She got down on one knee and examined his face, frowning at what she saw. She licked her thumb and rubbed it against his cheek, and the boy struggled against his mother's attempts at grooming him. _

_ John watched, realized his mouth had opened and forced it to close, a extraordinarily rare lump forming in his throat. _A son, I have a son. _The boy was now talking to Cortana excitedly and John desperately wanted to hear what he was saying, the child making enthusiastic movements with his arms, Cortana smiling and then laughing as the boy continued to speak. _I have a family. _He attempted to move towards them, to see if he could hear them if he was closer, but when he tried to walk his feet remained firmly planted and even with all his strength John could not move them. _

_ Cortana kissed his son on the forehead and then picked him up, balancing the child on her hip, and John watched helplessly as they disappeared into the wall of hard light. John looked down at his

feet, finally understanding. He could save the people he cared about most, but to do so he would have to let them go. There was only one decision he could make. _

**A/N: This is not an actual chapter, but more as set up for the final stage of the story. This bit of exposition did not fit with the tone of Chapter 91 nor did it fit in with Chapter 90, but I also do not want it to be a chapter by itself. I have tried by best with varying success to interweave the writing styles of the Halo novels and the Dark Tower series into the story, so now I decided to take a page out of Stephen King's book and create an interlude, which functions as sort of a prologue for the next chapter which is going to be pretty long in and of itself (at least by this story's standards) Hope you enjoyed it, and please review. The end is near.
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92. Chapter 91: The Dark Tower

Chapter 91: The Dark Tower

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world

The Second Coming

William Butler Yeats

â€|

The Master Chief stood over Roland, the gunslinger's broken body laying facedown in the mud, and still he was breathing. Still death refused to claim in even though his body was now all but useless. Roland was immortal, but he was far from invulnerable.

(You did good son. You did real good)

_I didn't want this, _John replied. He knelt beside Roland put a hand on his shoulder. Only a small amount of time remained, and he had to make the most of it, and yet his usually concluded mind was filled with doubt. He had not wanted to come back, to intervene, not when Cortana had finally come to terms that he was not coming back. To show up now, to fill her with hope, and then to crush it again was a cruelty that he did not want for her. And then he had read her mind, had seen what she had thought of him while he was battling Mordred. John did not think of himself as a god, did not want to be considered one, still thought of himself as a soldier. It was the only way he could understand himself. He had promised her that he would not change, and he had broken that promise in order to save her, to save both of them. Perhaps this was part of what the White, who in the High Speech is called Gan, described as his atonement. That he would have to change so much that Cortana would no longer be able to love him.

Cortana watched him, still on her knees, the pain in her hand dull

but not forgotten. He sensed her movement as she tried to stand up, looking around frantically. "Jake is alright."

She stared at him and from the corner of his vision he saw her slowly nod and slip back down into the grass, dry blood covering her arm. He continued to feel her eyes on him, his own avoiding her gaze as he went and knelt beside her as he had with Roland. Cortana winced in pain as John took her broken hand into his, his massive fingers closing around the shattered bones. There was no pop, no flash of light, but Cortana could still feel what was happening underneath his callused palm, could feel the pain ebbing away until it was nothing more than a memory. He let go of her hand and Cortana held hers up to her face. The bones had not just been healed and the thumb put back in its rightful place, but every knick and scratch she had received was gone as well. There was more, as Cortana now felt no pain in her back or her feet which had become increasingly unbearable in the last few months.

Her fingers trembled as she placed the hand in her lap, still trying to find his eyes but still failing. "How?"

The question held more weight to it than simply how John had healed her. His eyes met hers briefly and then went back down to the ground. "I never forgave myself. I could save an entire galaxy, but I couldn't save you."

"I told you I didn't care," Cortana said, still craning her neck, begging with mournful eyes for him to look at her.

"I do," John said more forcefully than he intended. He found it harder to control his emotions now, a side effect he had not anticipated, and desperately he attempted to reign them in. "I had to make a choice."

Cortana closed her eyes. This was the deal he had made, that if he was to save his family he had to lose it, at least for now. John continued, "If I've changed too muchâ€¦if you can't." He closed his mouth and swallowed.

She opened her eyes. He had changed, Cortana only having ever seen him this emotional once before when he had displayed his own self doubts to her for the first time in the bunker above Algul Siento, and now he was doubting himself again. When the man who was a wall of decisiveness felt his own confidence weaken she was the one he turned to, an action of trust that said more than words ever could. Slowly she placed both of her hands on the side of his face and gently lifted his head up, finally finding his eyes. Her own moved back and forward, seeing her own reflection in those bottomless blue wells as if she was looking for something. When she smiled at him his eyes widened in surprise.

"You can't fool me John. It's still you under there," Cortana said. She leaned forward and placed her lips on his forehead, placing her own there after the kiss was planted. John felt the tension in his shoulders ease, and let out a breath he had not realized he had been holding. No matter what happened to either of them she would never see him as a god, a Spartan, or even as a soldier, but only as a man, as a person. "And you're wrong. You did save me," Her lips were close to his so that it would only take a sliver of movement for them to touch as she whispered the words to him with their heads pressed

together and both their eyes shut. "We were both machines before we found each other. Both of us were lost. If I had to choose between the Gravemind, rampancy, watching you die, all the pain I've suffered in mid-world." She noticed that his hand had found her swollen stomach and she placed her own on top of it, "having to raise our son on my own. If I had to choose between all that and never meeting you I would choose you every time. You gave me something, something that not even Gan can take away." Her lips curled into a fresh smile, "Can you guess what it is?" John, who did not dare speak now simply shook his head. "Hope." John opened his eyes and saw Cortana's electric blue ones staring back at him, threatening to engulf him entirely, and he knew.

Ka, the celestial wheel which turned like a widening gyre would always tear them apart, would always make him leave her and force Cortana to wait for him, but as the wide arc reached its apex they would always be brought back together again. An unending cycle, one that both of them would have to endure even in death, but if Cortana had hope, the one person he felt was stronger than himself, then so would he.

A callused hand swept across her face, the fingers burying themselves into her hair, "I love you."

"I love you too," she leaned into his hand, rubbing her cheek against his palm. "You have no idea how good it feels to say that."

The wind blew, no more than a gust not even strong enough to lift her hair into its embrace, but still Cortana feared what it was heralding and braced herself for his departure. She wrapped both hands around his wrist, clinging to him as tight as she could.

"Cortana," John's voice had grown faint and she had to strain her ears to hear it. "I will always take care of you." His hand melted away and Cortana was left holding onto empty air.

(And I will always be with you.)

She moved her fingers to the dog tags around her neck, moving her thumb across its surface and feeling the engraved numbers against her skin. "You still don't understand do you John?" For some reason she did not feel the sorrow that she normally felt, grief replaced by a happiness and elation that she did not understand but welcomingly embraced it, certain that no matter what happened now everything would be alright, that the storm had finally passed. "We will always take care of each other."

â€|

Roland awoke, immediately concerned not because his vision was hazy, but because it was perfectly clear. The pain that the dry twist inflicted on his joints had disappeared and for the first time in over a year his hip moved without protest as he stood up. His light blue eyes bombarded the darkness, finding Cortana in the distance with Jake's head laying in her lap, the boy whispering softly to her. He continued to look, seeing Mordred lying on the ground. He was no longer in his spider form, now taking on the appearance of a man in his early twenties, his black hair matted with sweat but his body lacking the bullet holes or burn marks that had been inflicted on him in the battle. He looked like his father, and Roland wished now more

than anything for one last chance to reason with him.

_I tried son, _he thought. _I tried to give you a way out, give you a choice. _A lump formed and Roland forced it down his throat. _You were the only life I ever created. _

He thought about searching the darkness again, but realized the futility of it. The man he wanted, needed to talk to more than anything was gone, and the Tower was only a day away.

â€|

On the morning of the seventh day they rested, Cortana lying in a thick patch of grass, Roland and Jake gathering water by a nearby stream. They were still within eyesight, but far enough away so that Cortana could not hear what they were saying. She stood up, attempting to stretch out the stiffness in her legs that had formed over the course of the night. Her feet carried her to Mordred's grave, a pile of stones Roland had erected, something he had insisted on doing by himself. It was only after the being that had tried so hard to kill her and her son had died that she felt sorry for him. Mordred had been born the way he was, never given a choice to be anything other than a servant of the Red, to have been so convince about his own destiny that he was destroyed by it.

She placed a hand over one of the stones, _I forgive him. It wasn't his fault, he didn't know what he was doing. Please, even if it is in another world, just give him a second chance to be something other than what he was._ There was no answer, and Cortana did not expect there to be. The change had come over her like a thief in the night, the pull of the Tower and everything that came with it flickering out. As Cortana turned around to head back to the campsite she halted both in body and mind. The ghost wood door stood next to the dying campfire, the smoke rolling through the portal as if it was not there, a word written in a language that was neither English, Forerunner, Covenant, or the High Speech flowing with cryptic characters across it. Still Cortana found that she could read the dialect, the knowledge engrained just as deeply in her as her ability to breath.

****UNFOUND****

The gears in her head turned again, grinding very well but much more slowly than what she was used to, her legs carrying her as fast as they could towards the door. In a moment that she was not consciously aware of Cortana bent down and picked up Roland's satchel as she moved towards the door. Her hand brushed up against the extra gun belt inside. Cortana paused in her approached, grabbed the hard caliber that was stuffed into the front pocket of her sweat shirt and placed it into the holster of the belt.

"What are you doing?" It was Jake's voice, and Cortana turned around to meet it. The boy stood there with Roland, looking between her and the doorway.

"She's leaving," the gunslinger said. Jake's head snapped upwards and to the right as Roland spoke those words, fear replacing the confusion.

"No!" Jake said. He looked as if he was about to run but his feet

held him in place beside Roland. They were no more than a few feet apart but to Jake the distance might as well have been miles. "You can't leave. I needâ€¦" He stopped mid sentence, his mind searching for a more rational reason to convince Cortana to stay. "We still haven't found John. He's still out there."

"I've already found him," Cortana said. "And I'm going to see him again. We both will."

Jake opened his mouth when Roland cut him off, "You are going with her."

Again Jake's head snapped in the gunslinger's direction, "Then you're coming with us right?" Roland shook his head. "No, we're ka-tet. We always go together, no matter what."

"You two are ka-tet and an-tet, not me. My place is at the Tower."

"Damn the Tower!" Jake said, nearly shouting. Water began to build up in his eyes but he held it back, his fists trembling, "I've lost everybody. I can't lose somebody else. I can'tâ€¦I won'tâ€¦"

The gunslinger moved faster than Jake could react, wrapping his arms around the young boy's shoulders and holding him. Jake stiffened, resisting the unprecedented display of affection, before resigning to the plan ka had set for them and hugging Roland in return. "I love you boy." The gunslinger let go, Jake holding on for a moment longer. He too broke the embrace, taking his place beside Cortana. Water still filled his eyes, his efforts to keep them in place weakening with each passing second.

Cortana moved to Roland, carrying the gun belt with the blue steeled revolver out in front of her, "I don't need this anymore. It always belonged to you."

Roland's gaze remained fixed on Jake who's fingers went to the UNSC pistol still strapped to his waist, "I'll keep mine, just in case."

The gunslinger nodded, his hand reluctantly taking the revolver from Cortana. When he took it Cortana moved her hand and wrapped it around Roland's right one, squeezing it with a gentle firmness. It was time for her to complete her final mission in mid-world, a task that had begun with a conversation about a woman named Linda. A mission who's importance was just as vital to Cortana as her need to pass through the doorway. "When you reach The Dark Tower I want you to say the name of all of John's Spartans. The name of everyone me and him ever told you about."

"I will," Roland said, and Cortana squeezed his hand tighter.

"You're not an evil man Roland. I just wish you could see that."

The kind words stung him more than any insult could. "Cortana please." He hung his head, "Go before I ask you to stay."

Cortana slipped her hand out of Roland's, and with a few short steps it found Jake's. They both turned towards the doorway, Jake giving

one last look over his shoulder. Cortana twisted the handle on the door and felt the cool breeze of summer air kiss her cheeks, the smell of green grass and tree's filling her nose, and the sound of people laughing and cars slowly driving along a crowded street filled her ears. With a deep breath both she and Jake passed through the door which closed softly behind them.

Once again Roland was alone.

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It was Cortana who saw him. It was she who saw the last of him.

â€|

He stood on top of the hillside, on the precipice of his final march, the place of his salvation and his damnation, his weather worn boots just on the edge of the field of scarlet roses, The Dark Tower arranged in the distance and reflecting the setting sun. Memories were flooding him of lives past lived, coming at him faster than his mind could process. He denied the truth that they offered, but unrelenting they still came, and in the distance The Crimson King called to him, the Red glow of his all seeing eyes watching him with pent up malevolence from the balcony of the Tower far below the godhead he so desperately wanted to either reach or destroy.

(Come Roland, let us palaver. Where force will not stop you perhaps reason will. Both our tales are almost over, so come and let me show you the man you really are.)

The gunslinger shook his head, the pink and purple sky overhead casting out its normal blue hues, the whites of the clouds turning a dark red as they marched along the weakening paths of the Beams towards the lynchpin. Only two were left, both ready to break, and no one knew how to fix them.

(My son will find a way. I know he will)

_John? _Roland called out to him with his mind. No answer came and his heart weakened. There was so much more he wanted to ask him, so much wasted time he had spent distrusting a man he had come to respect that he now wanted to reverse. As always John's words were direct and Roland understood what they meant. The Ka-Tet of the Nineteen was never meant to save the Tower, only to delay its fall long enough for the true reclamation to take place. They had been the vanguards, the arbiters of a journey far greater than any of them could ever imagine. This was not the end, or even the end of the beginning, but instead simply the first verse in a song that stretched into the deepest pits of eternity.

_You always were better than me John, _Roland thought. _And you were a good friend. _

The Crimson King had always used force to prevent Roland from reaching the Tower, and always the gunslinger had prevailed. Now, thought, things were different, everything was for keeps, and the Red king wanted to talk to him in person. One last temptation then maybe, just maybeâ€|

Roland firmed his grip on the Horn of Gilead at his side, raising the cracked slug horn to his lips. He blew, harder than he had ever blown it before even when he was in the stomach of the mountains and the Flood had set upon him. He blew for all those who had fallen by his side, all those who had aided him in his journey, for all those oppressed by the forces of the Red which infested every world and reality. He blew.

His footsteps landed in the dark earth underneath the rose petals which blossomed as he passed, their yellow suns singing to him.

(Come Roland come. You're tale is almost done)

The scarlet petals brushed against the faded blue of his jeans, the warmth of the sun moving against his hardened face, his eyes squarely fixed on the Tower's doors in the distance.

"I come in the name of Aileen Ritter, Jayson Ritter, Alain Johns, Christopher Johns, Cuthbert Allgood, Robert Allgood, Burtock Hattlen, Charles Champignon, Jamie De Curry, Randolph Hest, Thomas Whitman, and Tim Stoutheart. I come in the name of the gunslingers of Gilead."

"I come in the name of Fred, Linda, Sam, Kelly, Kurt, James, Jai, Li, Naomi, Daisy, Joshua, Vinh, Isaac, Douglas, Will, Anton, Keiichi, Jorge, Malcolm, Maria, Solomon, Arthur, Jerome, Grace, Victor, Adriana, Joseph, Alice, Carris, Cal, Mike, Randall, and Sheila. I come in the name of the Spartans of Reach."

"I come in the name of John Cullum, Moses Carver, Aaron Deepneau, Nancy Deepneau, and Catherine Halsey. I come in the name of the Ka-Tet of the Rose."

"I come in the name of Eddie Dean, Susannah Dean, Donald Callahan, John Chambers, John 117, and Cortana. I come in the name of the Ka-Tet of the Nineteen."

He continued to call all their names, all those whom he and John had had met in their travels. His voice never wavered, never paused, never took a breath, never forgot a single person, and as he called their names each one passed before him. He saw them and he knew them all. With the last name he reached the foot of the Tower, the black marble reaching higher than even the heaven above, nineteen steps leading up to the entrance, the double black doors beating like a drum as they anticipated his approach. He stopped and placed a hand underneath his shirt, pulling out a small golden crucifix with a silver chain. Roland knelt down and placed the cross at the foot of the Tower, just as he promised he would do.

He stood up, his back straight, and whispered, "I come in the name of Susan Delgado."

The gunslinger marched up the steps, each foot finding his its place as he propelled himself upwards. He reached the doorway and his hands went to his hips, the right one with only two fingers left gripping the gun as best as it could. Drawing the revolvers from their holsters spread them shoulder width apart. "This is my sigul. Cam-a-cammal pria-toi Gan delah!"

(Good over evil, thus God wills forever)

The doors opened weightlessly at his words, pure light flooding from the crack of the entrance, rushing around Roland as the dawn rushes over the sky. The light was blinding, but Roland refused to squint, seeing in the center of the light a single blade of purple grass. He stepped towards it, the light engulfing and embracing him. With a wordless hiss the double black doors closed behind him and the last of the Line of Eld left mid-world.

Childe Roland To The Dark Tower Came.

93. Chapter 92: Victory in Japan

Chapter 92: Victory in Japan

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming. Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi troubles my sight

William Butler Yeats

The Second Coming

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1:17 P.M., August 15th 1945 (Gregorian Calendar) Central Park, New York, New York

Two soft pops announced the entrance of Cortana and Jake into the New York of 1945 though neither of them knew what day it was, and only Jake instantly recognized where they were at, Cortana being too preoccupied in her own silent pain to pay much attention to her surroundings. Trees, tall and thick, defying the concrete metropolis around them with their deeply entrenched roots, blocked their view of the rest of the park, large boulders jutting proudly up out of the ground further hindering their sight. Jake had just enough time to take it all in, eyes watchful and his right hand hovering above his pistol as he scanned for any threats, before the damn burst.

As her water broke part of Cortana's mind marveled in absent minded amazement at how much liquid could possibly be contained inside her body, the other half nearly succumbing to the growing panic inside of her. A delicate hand, belying the hardened woman underneath, grasped the tree as the flow subsided and Jake wordless helped her to the ground, his own eyes filled with the same fear she was facing. His conflicting thoughts collided with one another, fighting with swords drawn. He dare not leave her, but at the same time he knew that delivering a baby required more medical expertise than his limited knowledge of first aid could provide.

Just as one thought was about to slice the other's throat a voice called out from the distance, "Hey you folks alright?"

The boy's hand flew to his pistol, but Cortana's fingers wrapped

tightly around his wrist, "Throw it away." His sky blue eyes stared at her, fingers just close enough to touch the grips. "Do it," she hissed as the first of many contractions hit her, the soft footsteps of the stranger closing in on them. Jake nodded once and Cortana slowly released her grip. He brought the pistol up to throw it, but instead of releasing it from his hand he gazed dumbfounded at the sight that greeted him.

The gun was made entirely of plastic, its grey surface having the appearance of chipped paint, looking more like a cheap squirt gun than a weapon of war. The stranger's shadow stretched across the rocks as he made his way towards the pair and Jake shook himself out of his stupor, flinging the toy gun in a wide arc into the nearby bushes.

Mathew Braddock, a Wall Street man who made his living in the lion's den of business and stock trading, rounded the last tree and his black dress boots, shined to a mirror polish by one of the colored boys (as he referred to them) down at Penn Station that morning, skidded to a halt as he first caught sight of the Ka-Tet of the Reclamation. _Homeless, _he thought as he stared at the dirty pair, mud, dirt, and even a few speckles of what he thought might be blood dancing across their clothing. _They're homeless_. The entire exchange in his mind took less than a second before he resumed his tireless jog towards them, kneeling down next to Jake.

"She's giving birth," Jake said, doing his best to hide the concern and worry from his voice.

Mathew nodded, "How long have you been in labor?"

"Just started," Cortana replied, the first contraction subsiding. She had experienced pain before, was a person used to enduring immense torture, but this was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She had one menstrual cycle before conceiving a child with John, and the cramps she experienced then were similar to the ones she was experiencing now only much worse, with a peak of intense pain that felt as if someone was stabbing her with a knife, like a water melon was trying to exit a place it had no business trying to leave from.

"Alright," Mathew said, his black tie with white strips swinging like a pendulum from his neck. "Okay just stay here. I'm going to find a phone and call for an ambulance." He stood up, not even registering the mud that had gathered on his dress pants. Jake had never moved his eyes from Cortana, and the look in them gave Mathew the compulsion to pat him reassuringly on his back. "Don't worry kid. Your mom is going to be alright."

Jake nodded numbly at him as Mathew left in the same determined jog as he had entered. He felt Cortana's hand creep into his and he held it, holding back a wince as she squeezed it tighter.

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Mathew did not know what to make of the two outworlders he had met in Central Park, only a prickle of instinct telling him that wherever they came from they certainly did not belong in this New York, or even this time period. For one thing there was the clothes that they wore. Seeing a woman in a pair of boots was not something that was

completely foreign to him, especially after Pearle Harbor when women of all social and economic distinctions took the factories in droves, but it was the design of the boots that had unnerved him, they being of a quality he was not use to seeing despite their worn down appearance. The woman wore a pair grey baggy clothes that he was sure was thick enough to make her sweat more than any self respecting New Yorker should in the summer heat, and the boy wearing a short sleeved shirt in a style he had never seen before, almost looking like a T.

Jake himself had been a source of confusion for Mathew. When he first saw him Mathew had guessed his age to be somewhere around twelve or thirteen, but as he continued to look at the boy who sat solemnly in one of the chairs of the waiting room, expressly forbidden despite constant protests and perhaps near violence from attending the birth itself, he found that the boy seemed to be of a undetermined age. Mostly it was because of his eyes which had the appearance of a man who had seen more than a kid of his age should ever have to endure. Mathew had originally assumed that the boy was Cortana's son, but quickly dismissed the thought as he continued to observe him, Jake being too old and the woman being far too young for that to be even feasible. Moreover, Jake appeared to be acting more like an expectant father, pacing occasionally up and down the room, refusing to leave even after Mathew had given him a few dollars to go by dinner, than a kid waiting on the arrival of his new brother.

Mathew shook his head and returned his attention to the radio and the crowd of nurses, doctors, janitorial staff, and visitors huddled around it, all their senses trained on what the man who spoke out of it was saying. A colored man named Luke, who usually spent his days pushing a mop up and down the white hallways of the hospital, stood sentry by the radio. He was an older man with his face and hands full of wrinkles and black hair balding with just a touch of grey. Mathew was not necessarily prejudice, but was man so used to the system that society had put in place that he saw no need to question or change to climate of prejudice which pervaded his culture. This was why he thought it odd that a woman of supposedly Hispanic origins, if her last name was anything to go by, was the nurse assisting in Cortana's birth. Then again her complexion was white enough to pass the standards of even the most racially stingy of patients.

He focused his attention again on the radio, listening as the voice of President Roosevelt bellowed from the speakers.

"I have received this afternoon a message from the Japanese government in reply to a message forwarded to that government by the Secretary of State on August 11th. I deem this reply a full acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration which specifies the unconditional surrender of Japan. In reply there is no qualification. Arrangements are now being made for the formal signing of the surrender terms at the earliest possible moment. General Douglas Macarthur has been appointed the supreme allied commander to receive the Japanese surrender. Great Britain, Russia, and China will be represented by high ranking officers. Meantimeâ€|"

Static replaced the smooth and comforting voice of the four times elected president and Luke banged furiously with the palm of his hand on the side of the radio, several shouts from the listeners telling him to fix it. Luke bit his lip, holding back a scathing response that if he knew how to fix electronics he would not be working a mop

in a dump like this. Then suddenly the voices were silent, and behind all of them Jake straightened up in his seat.

Mathew felt as if an ocean wave, high and brilliant in its pounding current, at him at the very center of his being. It was a wave of, energy? Yes, that was the best way that Mathew could describe it, although it felt more fundamental than energy, different from anything else he had ever felt in his life, all of the thoughts that were swimming around beneath his skull immediately erased. He stood there motionless, as did the dozen others in the room, Luke's hand having stopped in mid swing and his gaze fixed at some point in the far distance. The man on the radio began to talk again, but now what he was saying seemed so inconsequential. Like what had happened in that one brief moment dwarfed all monumentous events that came before or even after it, and Mathew felt that he had just experienced something that was not years, decades, centuries, or even millennia in the making, but eons. Eons of planning and preparing for this one singular moment.

One of the nurses, her uniform white and pristine, her eyebrows plucked to near perfection, was the first to find her voice. "What was that?"

"I don't know," Mathew said. He turned around searching for Jake, only to find that the boy was gone like a gust of afternoon wind. "But I'm going to find out."

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Doctor Mark Hanlon had no sense of time as he stared up at the sky, wondering how long it had been since he had ever stopped to consider its beauty. In all the worlds there is no time as beautiful as sunset, when nature brings out all of the colors on its infinite palate and paints the vast canvas of existence with them. This was something that a certain AI on an artificial planet thousands of light years and several realities away from his own had discovered, even if it was just a faux sunset, and this was something that he was just finding out now. The Camel cigarette which he had let and only taken a single drag out of began to burn in between the two fingers that were holding it. He stared at it for a few seconds before throwing it out into the street, cars racing past him, the distant sound of thunderous celebrations emanating from Times Square dulling his ears. A new sound, that of opening doors, came from behind him and Mark turned around. He recognized the man that came out of them, a small crowd gathered in the hallway behind him, as the man who had brought the two homeless people to the hospital and triggered a series of events that would change his outlook on life. Decades later when lung cancer came to claim his life he would utter a single cryptic phrase to the family that surrounded his bedside. A phrase that not even he would fully understand the meaning behind.

I was there.

"You're the one right?" Mathew asked, Mark staring blankly at him. "The one that delivered the homeless woman's kid?" Mark hesitated for a few seconds before slowly nodding. "Well what room are they in?"

"Maternity Ward room 117," Mark replied. Mathew had just turned around when he put a hand to his temples, "No room 119." He gave

another confused look and Mathew looked at him exasperated.

"Well which is it, room 117 or 119?"

"I don't," Mark began. "I can'tâ€| " Mathew gave a loud sigh and marched back into the hospital. Mark blinked several times before resuming his vigil over the sunset.

â€|

The nurse smiled at the woman lying in the hospital bed in front of her, the newborn wrapped protectively in her arms and a swaddle of soft blue blankets. Even in the glow of her afterbirth the nurse found her to be a beautiful woman. Perhaps too beautiful, the symmetry of her face and the perfection of her features going far beyond what could occur in nature, almost as if the woman had been able to choose what she looked like. It was the nurse that had been left to do the nitty gritty work, filling out the birth certificate, checking the child's vitals and his weight. She had initially been disgusted that it was only her and one doctor that had been left to tend to the birth, the other staff far too busy either calling in sick in order to attend the spontaneous celebrations in the streets or huddled around the malfunctioning radio. The doctor himself had muttered something about needing to smoke once the child was born and with no other warning had ducked out of the room. The condition of the child himself had surprised, if not somewhat frightened her. He came into the world without crying, blue eyes of such brilliance that the nurse had never seen before wide open and searching the room around him, thick dark hair on top of his head. More than that was the birth mark on his right heel which was such a dark shade of scarlet that the nurse had initially feared that he was bleeding.

Still the nurse would not have traded this moment for anything else in the world, save perhaps one man. She had not failed to notice that the woman used the prefix Mrs. instead of Ms., and had been battling with herself whether or not to ask the question that was plaguing her mind. At last curiosity won, "Is your husband to be expected?"

Cortana looked up at the nurse, her arms holding her child tighter, "No." She looked back down at her son, his eyes now closed and his fragile frame locked in deep sleep. "He died."

"I'm sorry," the nurse said, subconsciously touching the gold band on her finger. "Was it in the war?"

"Yes," Cortana said quietly, almost without thinking.

"Europe or the Pacific?"

Cortana thought for a moment before answering, "Pacific." She smiled, "He was a navy man."

"Harvey was part of the Big Red One. Fought in Africa and Sicily," the nurse said, some measure of pride in her voice. It dropped though with her next sentence, "He died at Omaha. The letter I got said he was a hero, that he saved a man's life. He was recommended for the bronze star but it never came through."

Cortana's eyes brimmed with empathy as they locked with the nurse's, "Mine saved a life too when he died." The gaze held only for the briefest of moments before returning to her son, "He saved two lives that day."

"Well then we were both married to heroes," the nurse said and Cortana nodded.

"I'm sorry," Cortana said, her voice breaking. "But I don't have any way to pay for this. We have no money. We don't even have a place to go."

"I'm pretty active with the local parish. I know a few charities that can help out. Can make some phone calls if you want."

Relief flooded Cortana, "Thank you." The nurse smiled, and as she was about to leave the room Cortana called out, "What is your name?"

"Rosalita," the nurse said. "Rosalita Mendez, but most people around here call me nurse Rose."

"Rose," Cortana muttered as Rosalita walked out. "Ka's still working John." She felt warm, and not just from the blankets that surrounded her, but from the baby in her arms. She held him gently against her, marveling at him, at a life she had never suspected she would ever have been able to create. Easing a hand out from underneath him Cortana reached underneath her hospital shirt and pulled the pair of dog tags from around her neck, tenderly showing them to her son.

"This is your father. You may never meet him but you are going to grow up to be a lot like him, perhaps in more ways than I would like. You are going to be strong, and brave, and swift, and perhaps just a little bit lucky. You are going to protect those who cannot protect themselves, be stubborn and hard headed even when all the odds are set against you, and you will never give up no matter what." Cortana shook her head, "But you won't be a soldier like he was. Not if I have anything to say about it." The chain of the dog tags brushed up against her son's hand and he curled his tiny fingers around it. "I'm not going to be able to tell you about him, at least not until you are older. Old enough to understand. Even then it won't be the same as him being there, knowing what he is actually like, but if you only know one thing about him." A single tear escaped from her eyes. It washed down her cheek, leaving a shimmering streak until it reached her lips and Cortana's tasted its bitterness. "I'd want you to know that your father loves you. That he loved you so much he was willing to sacrifice everything to make sure you were safe." She smiled even as more tears began to stream out of her eyes, "Just know that much okay?"

The rough sound of boots thudded down the tiled hallway, and Cortana caught a brief flash of Jake's dirty blonde hair as he ran past the room. There was a screech as he slammed to a halt and in an instant the boy dashed into the room, his chest rising heavily as he tried to catch his breath. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Cortana said, smiling wearily. "Just tired like his mother."

The burden which had been present on his shoulders ever since Cortana had begun labor released its presence and Jake walked up to them, resting his hands on the rails of the hospital bed. "What's his name?" he asked, and Cortana told him. Jake smiled, "John son of John. I like it."

"You better," Cortana teased. "Do you want to hold him?" Jake blinked, his mouth suddenly dry, and Cortana not waiting for an answer lifted her son up and into his arms. "Make sure you support his head." Jake wrapped his arms around her son, and Cortana could have sworn that she had handed him a lead weight, the burden reappearing on his shoulders. "It's going to be tough," Cortana said, leaning back against the pillow, her spine sinking into the mattress. "Have you forgotten anything?"

Jake looked up at her confused and shook his head. "Have you?"

"No," Cortana said. "It's not so much forgetting things. Well I mean I have. I can't remember nearly as much as I use to. Everything from the UNSC archives, what I gathered on the Covenant and the Forerunners, at least the specific details, all of that is gone." She furrowed her brow, struggling to come up with an adequate description, "It's like my brain is prioritizing what memories are important and which ones are not. I remember everything from this time period, but all the other data—" she paused, her mind working at a far slower pace than what she was use to. "Sometimes it feels like memories are being blended together."

"Human," Jake said. "You have a human memory. Fallible."

Cortana sighed, "It's what I wanted."

"You're eyes have changed too. They're not electric blue they're—"

"Grey blue?" Cortana offered and Jake nodded. Cortana reached out with her arms and Jake handed him back to her. "What world do you think we are in?"

"Not a world any of us came from. Definitely not the keystone world or the world of the Tet Corporation." He began to dig into his pockets. "I heard the Japanese surrender on the radio, but it wasn't Truman who announced it. Roosevelt is still alive in this reality." His hand emerged out of his back and he stretched out two green bills in front of her. "Then there's this. Lincoln is on the one and Washington is on the five."

"It doesn't matter," Cortana said. "Not in the grand scheme of things. We'll make it no matter what. We're survivors." She smiled at her son, "All three of us."

With a burst of movement, and with the same heavy on his chest as Jake had, Mathew walked into the room, and immediately took a few steps out. "Sorry," he muttered, suddenly unsure of himself. "I just wanted to—" He gave a shaky laugh, "Actually I don't know why I—" His voice trailed off.

"It's okay," Cortana said, her voice weary but reassuring. "You can see him."

Mathew hesitated a moment longer before entering the room, a long line of people trailing behind him and filling up every corner. Jake moved closer to Cortana, his muscle's hardening, but Cortana placed a hand over his and his tension eased. Cortana turned her attention away from the gathering crowd, and for the last time spoke the High Speech to her son, "Bah-bo can calah." She leaned forward and pressed her lips on his forehead, "I love you John."

94. Announcement of New Project

Announcement of New Project

** A/N: I have gotten a few requests to do a sequel to "Other Worlds Than These" and the more I have thought about it the more I think it would be a good idea. However there is one caveat, I will only do it if there is a sufficient enough demand for such a story. Unlike "Other Worlds" I do not feel a pressing need to write it, but if people want to read what happens to the characters after the last chapter I will be more than happy to tell you. Here are a few plot elements that will be introduced and a preliminary chapter list just so that you all are forewarned about what to expect. **

Cortana was the main protagonist in "Other Worlds" and will remain in that position for the first few chapters. However, the focus will shift to her son for the remaining chapters. The sequel will be his story.

**The Master Chief will return at some point, and while there will be a number of chapters where he is not present he will remain a permanent fixture. **

At some point the rating of the story will be changed to M. Based on the above information I'm sure you all are smart enough to figure out why.

**Cortana and the Master Chief's relationship will be expanded upon as much as it can be, but again the focus will be John's relationship with his son. **

**While the sequel will have a story arc it is going to be structured more as a series of drabbles. It will be much shorter than "Other Worlds" as I will not be going into as much excruciating detail. **

There will be a "happily ever after" ending for John and Cortana, just so long as you stick with me until the last chapter.

Preliminary Chapter List

The Gyre Widens

Chapter 1: Lineage

**Chapter 2: Newborn, New Mother **

Chapter 3: Baby Steps

Chapter 4: The Bet

****Chapter 5: Father's Day****

****Chapter 6: Honeymoon****

****Chapter 7: My Father's Work****

****Chapter 8: Different ****

****Chapter 9: A Mother's Right****

****Chapter 10: Elizabeth Delgado****

****Chapter 11: Revelations****

****Chapter 12: The Decision ****

****Chapter 13: Ka****

****Chapter 14: Enlistment ****

****Chapter 15: Project Orion ****

****Chapter 16: The War in Vietnam ****

****Chapter 17: The Prodigal Son****

****Chapter 18: Empty Nest****

****Chapter 19: The God King****

****Chapter 20: The Battle for New Canaan****

****Chapter 21: Aftermath****

****Chapter 22: MJOLNIR ****

****Chapter 23: Doctor Halsey****

****Chapter 24: Resumption****

****So please if you want to see this sequel made post a review and tell me. If you do not than I am more than happy to let the story end with Cortana in the hospital with Jake holding her newborn son. I already know what happens after that, the question is do you want to know. ****

95. Chapter 95

****A/N: For those of you still not aware I have begun writing the sequel to Other Worlds Than These titled The Gyre Widens. It will be posted every Friday or Saturday night at 11:00 p.m. Thank you to all those who have read and reviewed this story, and I hope you will join me for the next stage in this adventure.****

End
file.